

HUON BELLE

By

CHARLOTTE I. DICK

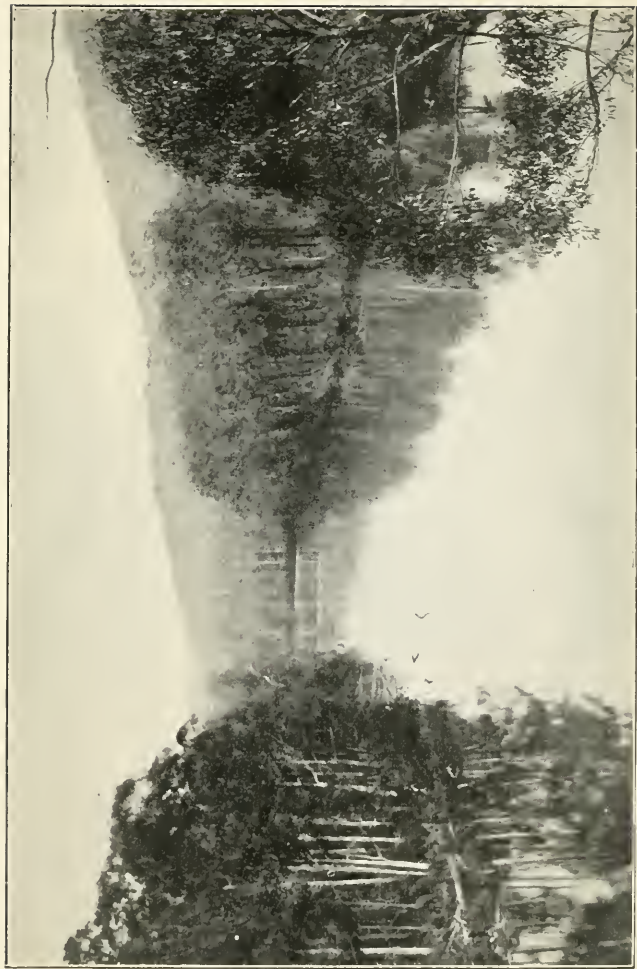


THE LIBRARY
OF
THE UNIVERSITY
OF CALIFORNIA
LOS ANGELES

JAMES DALLY
OLD AND RARE BOOKS
Oatlands, Tasmania
Telephone Oatlands 90

HUON BELLE





The still mirrored loveliness of the Huon River.

HUON BELLE

A NOVEL

BY

CHARLOTTE I. DICK

LONDON

ARTHUR H. STOCKWELL LTD.,

29, LUDGATE HILL, E.C.4

*All characters in this book are purely fictitious, and do not refer
in any way to any living person or persons*

Made and printed in Great Britain for Arthur H. Stockwell, Ltd
by H. E. Warne Ltd., St. Austell.

PR
9619.3
D55-h

DEDICATION.
TO THOSE
WHO KNOW THE LURE OF THE MOUNTAINS

1362037

CONTENTS

PART I

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	TELLS HOW VIRGINIA CAME TO THE WHITE BED - - - - -	11
II.	TELLS OF A GRAY LIE - - -	18
III.	TELLS HOW GOLDFINCHES SWUNG ON COSMOS - - - - -	25
IV.	BRINGS MENTION OF KANT'S STORE -	36
V.	TELLS HOW SOUND CARRIES IN THE NIGHT -	45
VI.	DESPERATE LONELINESS OF VIRGINIA LEE -	54
VII.	OF WHAT THE MAN FROM THE SETTLEMENT TOLD CAIRNS GILMORE - - -	63

PART II

I.	CHILDREN OF BELLE BAY - - -	77
II.	THREADS WOVEN IN THE LOOM - -	86
III.	THE THREADS TIGHTEN - - -	97
IV.	TELLS HOW AFTER SIX YEARS, REPORT OF TRAGEDY CAME TO THE BAY -	104
V.	FLOOD TIDE - - - - -	121
VI.	YOUNG SIMON DECIDES - - -	125

PART III

I.	DEBATE AT HILL FARM	-	-	-	137
II.	LETTERS FROM SIMON	-	-	-	152
III.	SIMON SURPRISES THE BAY	-	-	-	165
IV.	INFECTION OF YOUTH	-	-	-	171
V.	INSIDIOUS POWER OF BEAUTY	-	-	-	190
VI.	THE SMOKE OF THEIR BURNING	-	-	-	198
VII.	BELLE OF THE HUON	-	-	-	208

PART IV

I.	TELLS HOW CAIRNS GILMORE LEFT HIS WILL				213
II.	TELLS OF PRIMULA'S DECISIVE ACTION	-			218
III.	TELLS HOW GINNY WAS MADE VIRTUALLY A BEGGAR	-	-	-	223
IV.	OF THE DESTINY THAT SHAPES OUR ENDS				228
V.	TELLS HOW VIRGINIA CAME AGAIN TO THE WHITE BED	-	-	-	234

PART I

CHAPTER I

TELLS HOW VIRGINIA CAME TO THE WHITE BED

THE old woman simply did not know what to make of it. There stood an unknown limpit-like stranger, quietly refusing to go!

She tried again. "But your name, child? I don't seem to know anything about you or where you come from. Are you from the town? What have you come to me for?"

There was nothing to explain the presence of the indomitable small figure carrying her own suitcase and standing resolutely on the farmhouse doorstep, yet old Mrs. Gilmore found herself peering out, unable to shut the door in the face of such quiet determination. She put her questions and waited, hand on latch.

"I'm Ginny Lee. I've come to work for you please."

The confidence of the small creature! Out of the mists of the autumn evening the soft voice fell like the piping of a little flute, sweet in quality, unwavering, certain of itself.

"But I'm not so sure I want anyone of your size to work for me. I want a strong, grown woman or nobody. Besides, I've never set eyes on you in my life."

The child took no notice, persuing her own line of argument. "They told me over to the boardin' house that old Mrs. Gilmore of Hill Farm could do with another pair of hands and gladly: they told me you sent round a message, so when they said they hadn't any use for me to scrub and that,

HUON BELLE

I thought I'd come and do for you. You *is* Mrs. Gilmore, isn't you? "

For the first time uncertainty crept into the voice, it trembled as if fearing the answer. Well, the girl must be *made* to understand.

" Oh, yes, I'm her, certainly, but how can you expect me to take you into this house without a reference, or knowing a word about you at this time of night, eh? I want to know where your folks live that they let you come out alone, and where will you go to-night, supposing I don't take you? "

" I've nowhere to go."

The dreariness of the words, the self-control behind them, the way the feet in their shabby boots, never moved, dismayed the old lady; her brain began to connect this with that. She asked suddenly:

" You're name's Ginny Lee, is it? Not by any chance the child of that poor couple away in the bush, I read about, who lost their lives in that horrid sawmill accident? "

" Yes, I'm her, I'm Ginny."

" But that place is forty miles away! How did you get here? "

" Walked. It's taken me over a week all the way."

" Hadn't you any relations or friends to help you or look after you up there? "

" No, none. I hate the place."

" But what made you choose to come to a district like Belle Bay, where all the farm-folks pretty well work for themselves? There's only the boarding-house and Colonel Severings (and he's got Fanny and the cook here when he *does* come from his town home and that's seldom) and my son and me, who can afford a servant-maid. You're too little for me: better go up to town and try for a place there."

" I've got to stay hereabouts, please."

The extraordinary confidence that outruled the obstacles in her path shone like a brave light from the girl's eyes; she



The Huon Belle, or Sleeping Beauty, lay at the head of Belle Bay. (distant).

HUON BELLE

simply stood quietly under the verandah that ran the length of the back rooms of the farm homestead, undashed, undaunted.

"But I tell you I don't want anyone so young, I can't give you work, my son would never stand a half-grown thing like you about. . . . You must have some special reason for wanting to come here, what is it?"

The old lady's ears had caught the tramp of heavy boots through the orchard, a dog barked sharply and rattled his chain by the stables, the footsteps drew nearer. Her son Cairns coming in from work.

"Quick, out with it?" Her suspicions, the easy suspicions of the very old, were making her fidgety, she wanted to get rid of the girl before Cairns saw her and began blaming his old mother.

"I've got to live somewhere I can see the Huon Belle. I've *got* to!"

The eyes, wild and dark as a deer's in her pale face, besought, appealed. Astounding reason, unexpected as it was simple.

The Huon Belle, called by some the Sleeping Beauty. That long gracious stretch of mountains at the head of Belle Bay, outlining, with perfect profile turned skywards, the reclining figure of a Giant woman. There was something utterly tranquil in the attitude; and something infinitely peaceful, tolerant, beautiful in those guarding mountains had affected the little bush girl so deeply that it was just as she said, she had *got* to live within sight of it: of that maternal dignity, brooding, as the massive figure did, above the lives of those who worked out their days in its shadow. She was too ignorant to express even to herself the reason she was so affected by the mountains; she had never heard the words lure, enchantment, infatuation; wouldn't have understood them if she had, for she was only a country-bred child, parented (it was rumoured) by a hardworking timber hand

HUON BELLE

and an immigrant Scotswoman who had found her way to Tasmania, and there (as alien and home-longing as he who wrote "Hills of Home";) lived and died.

Virginia Lee only knew that when both earthly ties were cut away with vindictive suddenness, her one passionate wish was that she might find work to do, that she might live in just that spot where she could see the Huon Belle stretched; see the long lines, serene profile, graceful neck, full bosom and resting body, forever immovable. To fall asleep, knowing that she might always open her eyes to that calm beatitude . . . always, always.

So old Mrs. Gilmore stared, influenced beyond herself by that evidently honest reason. She had heard of grown men and women who had visited Belle Bay and become obsessed with the beauty of the Belle, certainly, but never working girls!

"Well, I can't possibly say——" she muttered, and fell dumb, nonplused.

The rough voice of her son, scraping the mud off his boots on the edge of the verandah, broke into the silence: "Who've you got talking there, mother? You'd no right to be standing at the door this chill evening. Get along inside and I'll fix her."

Mrs. Gilmore's quavering voice drifted past Ginny to the tall, slouching man in a bluey coat. "It's a young girl here, Cairns——"

Finished with his boots he came along the verandah, and taking the old lady by the shoulders, he pushed her without ceremony into the kitchen and made to shut the door in the girl's face, saying to her:

"Get off home now, whoever you are. We want no beggars here."

Ginny heard a protest, bitten off by the slamming of the door, "She has only come to apply for the situation, she's a . . ."

HUON BELLE

Still hopeful, or perhaps without even physical sensation enough for that, the girl turned and stared into the dim night; night folding the bay as softly in its dark arms as a crooning mother, and above, through, over it all she could feel more than see in that half-light, the long, sleeping form of the Belle: mist veiled the breast and neck, but rising out of the veil the splendid face bid her wait patiently.

Inside, warm firelight danced on the pitch-pine walls of the kitchen living-room. The man struck a match and shielding it in coarse, earth-grained hands, held it to the wick of the parafin lamp on the table. It showed his face grotesquely for a moment in the flare of light; cold, though fine, lined features, long upper lip, good nose, eyes the colour of pale winter skies; yet saddest of faces that which, though handsome, is hardened rather than softened by the tracings of Time's inevitable finger. Meanness had left deep seams, contempt, avarice. . . . He turned so that the shadows beyond the ring of lamplight swallowed his features again, and asked abruptly: "Well, have you told her we can't keep a baby? You want someone with a bit of horse-strength to do the work, you're failing pretty fast, you know." His brutal way of telling her so made the old woman turn mullish; suddenly she made up her mind that she was going to keep the girl, if only to pay him out, she couldn't bear him to throw her failing years in her face. There was plenty of work in her yet!

She began to tell him that Ginny was the child of those poor victims of the sawmill tragedy, and growing cunning, pointed out the fact that as she hadn't any home or people, they would get her cheap.

"Bert Lee's kid, is she?" Cairns was stuffing his pipe; he put it in his mouth and lit it before he spoke again.

"Hum. Well, that puts a different squint to it. Her mother was one of the best workers at the mill settlement, neat thrifty, I've been into her house. . . Have the kid in and let's have a look at her. Unless she's gone."

HUON BELLE

No, she had not gone. She was standing with her hands behind her, her head thrown back looking away out from the verandah at the faintly etched line of mountains against the night sky, listening to the muffled beat of silver breakers on the beaches far down the coastline : nor did she move when the block of light was thrown over her from the open door.

“ Come inside, my girl, and let’s have a look at you. Used to work I should say? ”

She obeyed him, blinking owl-like as he shut her inside, saying in answer to his query :

“ Mother taught me all the work I know. I’ll do anything you ask, for you and Mrs. Gilmore. Anything; scrub, sweep, wash. . . . ”

“ You! you little half-starved rat! You look as if you’d slip down the plug-hole when you’re washing! ” he told her not unkindly, though his mouth twisted contemptuously. “ Well, it’s for the missis to decide—if she cares to take you instead of a good, strapping help. ”

“ Little ones often has the most go in ’em. ”

All at once, Mrs. Gilmore had felt a lump in her old throat at sight of the pinched white cheeks under the straw mushroom hat, with its band of some black stuff. Left to herself she was kindly, but everyone knew Cairns had her under his thumb; and it could press hard as granite. “ I’ll try her for a week. ”

“ Very well, ” Cairns said to Ginny as if she were a pawn, “ she’ll try you for a week. I’ll give you ten shillings to begin with, and your keep. Mind, you’re lucky to be taken in at all without references. Now you best get to work right away and help get my tea. Show her where the servant’s room is, mother, and look smart up there you—what’s your name again? ”

“ Ginny, Mr. Gilmore. ”

“ Gin, eh? Well, get along and show if there’s any spirit in you! ” He blew a cloud of rank tobacco smoke



The view from Ginny's Attic of The Belle.—(near view),

HUON BELLE

after them, and sank down into his arm-chair by the fire, muddy clothes and all.

And up under the shingle roof of the old farmhouse, Ginny, following directions, found herself, candle in hand, in a room with a sloping ceiling that made her think of a steep cave. And it *was* to be just that . . . her own sheltering cave for many years to come: no one now climbed the steep stairs, no one could look in the windows but the sun and the white moon and the curious winking stars. It was long and narrow, and it smelt of old lavender, for in her active years, Mrs. Gilmore had always dried her lavender there at the sunny casement window that faced clear away to the head of the bay. Ginny put down her candle on the washing stand and went in a swift step that had the lightness and silence of bird-flight, to the window. Yes, there she lay, face up to the sky, for always and always, just outside her thin wall! She could see her from her bed if she pulled it so; the Belle would be there in the morning when she woke, lying close. . . .

The bed was painted white, a relic from an old spare room, scratched, to be sure, its iron stag in the tracery at the foot minus an antler, but to Virginia, used only to a wooden bunk in a mill settlement hut, it spelt wonder, luxury. The white crotchet quilt made of it a royal couch to the bush child, she stroked it gently, and suddenly, with a burst of tears, she fell on her knees and sobbed into the pillow.

"Oh, but I never dared to ask you God for a *white* bed's well as the sight o' the Belle. I'll be good for keeps now!"

CHAPTER II

TELLS OF A GRAY LIE

TWELVE years old is not a great age. In fact, it is a very diminutive age, and a very little span in comparative time, but it is quite a long way to have travelled when life has knocked you from one sharp corner to another. Still, twelve years old is a very young age to set out to earn your living, in an entirely strange world. But it makes you keep your eyes open, that knocking about does, makes you want to get down to essentials. You learn things you can't help, accumulating a certain lore of your own.

Ginny, as all girls in the Colonies do, developed early. Her reasoning and executive powers were far beyond her twelve years, else had she been content to drift along with those companions in the bush-settlement who, any one of them, would have kept her in their home for the work she would give them. Perhaps she might not have been so certain of what she wanted if one fine, bygone summer's day her father had not borrowed a gig and driven them all in to Belle Bay to see the Regatta. It was then that her dark eyes were first lifted to the Huon Belle, then that she first began to dream dreams. She saw it but that once in her parents' lifetime, but she did not forget. . . .

In the Lee family there had never been time for sentiment or outside interests, daily life had been condensed into the limits of the timber forests: the children of the settlers, Ginny among them, had been obliged to go to the State School, or the Inspector fined their parents. Ginny

HUON BELLE

had attended, under protest, for five years, that is to say, from the time she was seven until the accident; and she was alert enough to know that if it were found out in this new district that she was as young as that, the hated inspectors would be after her again.

Then why not say when asked that she was fifteen? There was no one to prove that she wasn't, with both parents dead, was there?

She sat on the edge of the white bed where she had just told God she was going to be good "for keeps," and wondered if she would be telling a black lie: white lies she knew about, they were things with double meanings, like telling the teacher you had done your sums when you hadn't—well, you had—yesterday, perhaps!

White lies. Black lies. Couldn't she tell them she was fifteen and just call it a gray lie? She *would* reach that advanced age some day, and perhaps they wouldn't ask her for a long time; she cheered up wonderfully at the thought; and she was getting older every day, that was a comfort.

Suddenly she slipped off the bed and opened the suitcase that had come with her mother from Scotland so long ago that the catch wouldn't fasten, and it had to be tied round with a bit of rope. Ginny pulled out a check overall and slipped it over her fair head; she brushed herself into tidiness, rubbed dry the eyes still red-rimmed after that burst of overwhelming grateful tears, and had her foot on the top stair as Mrs. Gilmore quavered from below: "Come along! Come along now, Ginny, I'm waiting to show you how to set the cloth."

This was the time to show them what she could do. She listened to all the repetition of directions and then set to work while the old lady went into the back room, a kind of scullery, where the stove was, to cook the chops for tea. The kettle was put to boil at the open fireplace in the living-room where Cairns still sat smoking and reading the paper.

HUON BELLE

His eyes took a critical glance now and again at the little unfamiliar figure. He noticed she moved quickly, deftly; when she walked she seemed to skim over the ground, very different from the rheumatically, heavy tread his mother moved with! She was silent, too; the old lady's stream of talk always irritated him after a hard day: before the table was finished setting he found himself openly watching the swift, soft movements with a certain sense of relief, it amused him to see how terribly earnest she was about getting the cloth straight and everything on it just so. When it was finished, butter, jam, spoons, knives, plates, cups with blue roses, everything placed to her evident satisfaction, Cairns noticed she had only set for two. He thought for a moment biting on the stem of his pipe, then without a word, he went into the inner room, and shutting the door, went over to his mother at the stove.

"Where did you tell the child she was to have her tea?"

"I haven't told her anywhere yet, time enough when tea's ready, it doesn't worry me, but she best have it in here, I suppose."

"That's what we better make up our minds about. What position is she going to have in the house, it's going to be a bit awkward. . . ."

"And why?" She turned the chops and slipped some halved tomatoes into the frying-pan.

"Well, you can't put her on the level of the ordinary servant. They always said up at the camp, I've heard, that there was some mystery about Mrs. Lee, she was a lady born before she ever came out here with the immigrants. Anyone can see the girl's a cut above the rough bush-kids, that's why she hated to stay there. I should say she had better start having her meals with us right away, save difficulties by and by."

"There might not be any by and by," Mrs. Gilmore said tartly. "If I only keep her the week there won't!"

HUON BELLE

"Ho, you'll keep her, see if you don't! you'll be sticking to her like a leech, never you fear. If I know anything about a winner, that's one in there!" When he went back and sank into his chair Ginny had finished the table, and was sweeping up the hearth preparatory to toasting the slices of bread she had cut and placed in readiness on a plate.

She looked sideways at his muddy boots when he stretched his legs before the fire, then asked, innocent of any insolence:

"You're very wet. Shall I bring your slippers, Mr. Gilmore?"

Cairns stared.

"Perhaps you'd like to take off my boots as well for me?" he asked with sarcasm.

"I don't mind," Ginny said cheerfully. "I often helped pull off Dadd——" she broke off suddenly, turning very white, locking her hands together involuntarily. It was months before they could get her to mention her parents, she hastily stopped when their names slipped out. She cried now softly, pointing:

"Oh, there they are under the table! What a funny place."

He didn't know whether to snub her for an interfering little puss, but before he had decided she had the carpet slippers out, his boots off, and the slippers on, and was saying with a little air of horror:

"These boots are simply shocking, I'll put them to the stove so they'll dry by the morning."

Presently she was back again, sitting on her heels intent on making toast, as much at home as a little stray cat would have been if left unmolested in the warm glow. Her cheeks burned to a rose pink; she put up the hand that was not occupied with the toasting-fork to shield it, showing, as she knelt, tilted backwards, in the immature lines of her slender figure, no more shape than a boy, Cairns thought. Though he had not had much experience with girls; no time for them he would

HUON BELLE

have said. Being an only child, and never a friendly one, he had made few small friends, none of little girls; besides, his parents did not encourage them, they meant play instead of work, and at Hill Farm, work was a fetish; grind, grind from morning to dark, all weathers, all seasons: as long as he could remember, apples had stopped all channels to anything apart from work, apples and their production and garnering had filled all his thoughts and time from the day he left school; even before that his spare time was filled with apples: they held no beauty or enchantment for him, even when his trees were laden to the ground with perfection of colour—red, green, gold; but they exercised over him another spell, the enchantment of the money they meant. Ten years ago, when his father died, he had come into everything, the Will stipulated only that his mother should be given a home: he gave her that in name, but all his energies, sympathies, devotions were wrapped in his land—that long strip of arable soil that stretched for fifty-five acres along the banks of the Huon River where the sweep of water formed itself into Belle Bay. The river was on the lower slope, where small steamers called at a jetty to load his fruit for transit to the big steamers lying at Hobart; the High Road was on the upper, where lorries, quicker, though more expensive mode of carriage, bore fruit to the same port.

Hill Farm in apple land. . . . As valuable property as was to be found in the county of Buckingham, Tasmania . . . and beside Hill Farm branched another adjoining: another known as Gourly's Bit, where lived the Gourlys, a feckless family, who, nevertheless, refused to sell. It was a Naboth's Vineyard to Cairns, who meant eventually to have it fall into his hands as surely as mulberry leaves fall in Autumn. Buttoned up behind that tight face of his was an unfathomable mind. . . .

He mixed with no one, confided in none of his neighbours, had lived as isolated as a man on an island, with his old mother,

HUON BELLE

growing more morose each year until at thirty-three years old there was not a more unpopular man at Belle Bay; feared, respected, perhaps, but not a soul would have raised a hand had it been put to the vote whether or not to keep him in the district, he took no part in social or political interests, lay as low as Brer Fox when improvements were mooted least they should mean designs on his pocket.

Now as he sat with his body relaxed and comfortable, tired with that precious tiredness that follows on hard work in the open fields, he was conscious of a certain satisfaction in watching Ginny. The homely smell of toast tickled his appetite, she was browning it to the last degree of perfection. . . . His eyes took a speculative expression; he thought: "We've got her cheap. She seems wonderfully adaptable and quick to pick things up. I'll see to it that she depends on us: then, if mother gets her well trained into my ways she'll be able to carry on after the old party pops off. She's got the makings of a taking little wench, too, when she fills out a bit, I'd like to know what age she is." And stooping to knock out his pipe on the hearth, he asked aloud:

"How old are you, Ginny, my girl?"

The last slice of toast dropped into the red glow with the start she gave, she felt her heart thump, her cheeks burn with more than fire heat. She gulped and told her gray lie steadily:

"I'm fifteen, Mr. Gilmore."

"A poor little bit of frippery I should call you for fifteen years," he scoffed, "we'll have to make a better production for the money of you here, won't we, eh?"

She nodded, dark, frightened eyes avoiding his. Then he wasn't going to tell her he didn't believe it! The innocent deception that in after years was going to mean so terribly much more than she ever intended, was slipping easily past, a shadow of a lie. . . .

"I always was a weedy one——"

"Fifteen," Cairns was thinking, "leave her fairly quiet

HUON BELLE

for another—say three years—and with healthy living and plenty of sun now she's out of those mokey forests, and good feeding, why, I shouldn't wonder but she'll turn into an attractive little piece, fit for—anything! ”

CHAPTER III

TELLS HOW GOLDFINCHES SWUNG ON THE COSMOS

GINNY waited until the big clock hanging in the hall had struck six next morning, counting as the last note boomed through the death-still house, then threw back the bed-clothes. Mr. Gilmore had said he wanted breakfast sharp at seven, Mrs. Gilmore had grumbled she was too old to be expected to get it by that hour, Ginny had volunteered. But could she cook bacon and porridge without making a burnt mess of it? still irritably.

“Oh yes, indeed, she *often* had, quite by herself.”

She dressed in a cold, white pool spilt by a lop-sided moon on the floor of her attic, and as she slipped into her overall she peeped out through the open curtainless window to the bay; it lay palely cradled in the comfortable stretching arms of the hills; she was certain she could hear the even deep breathing of the Belle lying up there at the head of the bay; the darling Belle who had guarded her sleep, who gave her, even in unconsciousness, the most wonderful sensation of security!

Two stars hung in the rounded plum-blue arch of the sky still winked and blinked sleepily after their long night: and what a life that brilliant beauty Venus had, trailing always after the moon; her mother had told her it was Venus, the handmaiden of the moon; she fancied the lady moon saying: “You may follow me, but no nearer please. I command you to keep at one respectful distance forever!” Like herself and old Mrs. Gilmore, she thought, twisting her hair into a knob

HUON BELLE

and sticking it with two hairpins, I'm handmaiden to her, I mustn't forget that and be familiar, goodness knows I'm ugly enough to be anything! So I've to keep my place! And by the jumping candle-light she went downstairs as plain and meagre a little bit of humanity as you could see in the bay.

But nobody set store by appearances at Hill Farm; old Mrs. Gilmore with her heavy, rheumatically feet and gnarled hands muddling along through the household work was as shapeless and weather-beaten as the stump of an old tree, but like an old tree there was something steadfast and pathetic about her, and her kind, lined face stirred some chord in Ginny, she learnt by the end of her first winter to love it dearly. . . . Then Cairns was the shambling type of man nobody cares to dwell upon: between the two Ginny was to burn like a faint candle-flame, flickering, thin, yet growing ever stronger and brighter in concealment, ready to take, humbly enough, her place with the surrounding realities.

In no time she had the fire crackling in the wide fireplace where red eyes from last night's she-oak and gum logs still glowed among the piled ashes: a handful of dry kindling, fresh logs, a blow with the bellows and the chimney was merrily swallowing tongues of flame. Then the oven fire . . . and very soon there floated out the warm, welcome odours associated with breakfast all the world over, bacon, porridge, coffee, filled the room. Before seven o'clock struck she had the lamp lighted and the table set, for daylight was an hour away still, though rosy streamers were scrolling the Eastern sky.

Cairns came yawning from his room and gave her a curt nod.

"That's good—glad you're punctual. Hope you keep it up. You make mother stay in bed for breakfast, she's better in till the day warms!" And he began to shovel in his food.

HUON BELLE

It became habit, Mr. Gilmore's breakfast. . . . Mrs. Gilmore's, on a tray to her bedside . . . then, when the house was free of stumping footfalls and his harsh voice, her own, usually eaten standing by the inner-kitchen table.

She threw herself from that first day with almost passionate energy into the work of the house, so pathetically eager was she that they should find no cause by the end of the week to say that they needed her no longer. With more than a child's reasoning she meant to make herself indispensable to the man first by feeding him punctually and well; to the old woman second by taking immense care of, and interest in, the household gods: she would be so terribly careful, not even a cracked cup should break, no saucepan should burn: there were various ornaments of not much value except for the remembrances they held that Ginny dusted for old Mrs. Gilmore with really religious fervour, though on that first morning she was within an ace of knocking onto the fender a china dog with blood-red spots, one on his head, one on his white chest, and two more flat as pancakes on his back. It was the coincidence of the exact position of the pancake spots that gave Ginny such a start, for among the half-dozen wee treasures that she had brought stowed away in the old suitcase from that home of tragedy in the forest, lay a china dog wrapped in an old lace handkerchief (the wedding handkerchief, yellow with age now, that Mrs. Lee once told her daughter had belonged to the grandmother for whom Ginny was named Virginia) and the dog wore the same smile, was the same size and had the *very same* red spots. In fact, he was the Hill Farm dog's twin, even to—for Ginny tore upstairs and brought him down—even to the fact that one dog's tail curled in cold china round his stern to the right, the other to the left! She was so excited that she could not wait for the old lady to come out. She went to the bedroom door and knocked.

HUON BELLE

"Please, Mrs. Gilmore, I've the most curiourest thing to show you."

"Come in, Ginny, I'm so comfortable here hearing you bustling about the housework that I thought I'd stay in another hour till the fog lifted."

"Yes, do stay, Mr. Gilmore said 'You make her stay in out of the cold, don't let her out till the day's warmed.' But I've come to show you that—that my dog's come here to find his mate. Will you look, now!"

She held the two dogs carefully, triumphantly, one in each hand facing one another. A beaming smile broke over the face with its gray, roughened halo of hair; in both, the child's and the woman's, was the same childlike incredulous astonishment and pleasure. Such a little thing, but how it drew them together . . . how glad Mrs. Gilmore was now that Ginny had not been made to take her supper in the scullery! How glad that she could treat the child as a friend. The china dog managed in the very superiority of that coldly disdainful look that pug-nosed dogs are in the habit of wearing, to draw the owners together.

"Well I never! Well I never did, Ginny. That makes a pair. I never had but the one, and him my husband bought me from a booth at the first regatta Belle Bay ever had. It sort of turned the scale, that dog did, I'd had the two lovers Mark Gilmore and Ben Gourly up till then. But I thought if Mark is as generous as this—well! So I took him that day. But the generous spasm never took him again as you might say, for that was the first and last ornament he ever gave me. I always hoped for a pair."

Suddenly Ginny was resolved, she said eagerly:

"Well now I'm going to give mine to you so you'll *have* a pair. May they sit one each side of the dining-room clock? You see mine's got a *wee* chip off his nose, poor dear, but no one but you an' me will ever know."

"That will look fine," the old lady said, wonderfully

HUON BELLE

pleased. Through all her bleak hardworking life she had had few who had shown her attention, her son with his sour face had frightened the neighbours away. In the middle, busy years it had not mattered so much, but old age is a sad weariness without sympathy and friendship. And here was this little dark-eyed thing, dropped so queerly out of the bush into her water-side home, here she was eagerly ready with both.

It was cheery to come out at eleven o'clock to find a nice fire burning, her chair drawn up, her knitting and spectacles on a small table where Ginny presently brought her a cup of beef-tea for a surprise.

"It'll warm you up," she said, spreading a napkin. "The sun's hiding still."

"You'll spoil me, child."

"I'd like to. Folks up to the timber forests won't give you time to do a thing for them. They're all working so hard at the mills to make a pile an' get away. You see, it's not Homes like here." She looked quickly through the window at the space running to the water that had once been a garden, at the orchard's well-planted, symmetrical rows of trees, and beyond at the dear, friendly outline of the Belle, rising majestically from the thinning fog, draped in twists and veils of pale transparent clothing. Why, anyone could see that here in sight of all that, you'd have the feeling of never, never wanting to hurry off to somewhere else. For mountains were not just solid inert masses of earth and stone to Ginny, trees were not just trees, they had a separate very real life of their own; it was these fancies of hers so precious, so important, in her daily life, that had made Ginny unpopular with the unimaginative settlement children, they simply could not, and did not, want to understand her. "Ninny," they called her and the boys had tormented her by saying her mother had seen a kelpie before she was born and it had made her be born queer, and once a wag wrote some doggerel

HUON BELLE

on the blackboard when the teacher was out of the room:

Ninny Lee

Climbed a tree

And swopped her brains with a honey-bee,

Now she's as queer as a brown kel-pie.

He—he—he!

The ribald he—he—he's ran right down the blackboard.

It did no good to Ginny that her persecutor was given a good caning, the stinging rhyme was flung at her on all occasions; *why* she minded it so much she could not have told, but it held some hideous meaning for the sensitive child. Little wonder she had left the bush gladly, anxious never to see the place of her unhappy childhood again, when the ties that bound her snapped.

Planted deep inside her was a love of beautiful things, ordered things, and with it, a hatred of all that was ungentle and uncouth.

The tranquil atmosphere at Hill Farm house, the silent rooms, the ticking of the hall clock which she could hear everywhere, even old Mrs. Gilmore's often querulous voice, held some wonderful attraction for her; as the hours wore on she felt the spell draw tighter, until the thought that she was only on approbation spurred her like the prick of a sword. And she was ever conscious while she went from one task to another, from sweeping bedrooms to peeling vegetables, from replenishing fires (for dry gum-logs burn very quickly) to setting the table for dinner at mid-day, was ever conscious of that long, lazy figure stretched, face upwards, at the head of the Bay. Funny that she should feel so certain that the Belle was as conscious of her as she was of it: it was one of those things that made her kelpie-queer, of course! Yet wrapped up with the feeling of wanting to please her employers, was the absurd certainty that by doing her best she would please the Belle, too . . . of course, it all came back to this, that to stay here *meant* to stay near the Belle.

HUON BELLE

Yet she, Ginny, was, when you thought of it, no more than an ant toiling at the foot of the mountains, as little seen, as little acknowledged . . . and yet her teacher had told her that ants *made* mountains. If you believed that you would have courage for anything.

After dinner, when she had cleared all up, scoured the pots till they shone, scrubbed out the scullery and shaken the mats, Mrs. Gilmore told her she could have the afternoon to herself until four o'clock.

"I'd like you to make me my cup of tea then," she said, settling by the fire for a nap. "Some afternoon we'll walk over to the Kant's store and I'll see about getting you some decent print dresses, and gracious me, child, those boots look nearly through."

"Well, the bush tracks were pretty rough," Ginny said, standing first on one leg and then on the other while she looked over her shoulder at the holes in her soles, "forty miles . . . and not a shoe-maker at any of the places I stayed at."

"Dear, dear. Well, we must go one day. But it's too cold to-day," and she settled back into her arm-chair again like a contented old tabby.

Once having decorously shut the door behind her, Ginny turned into an excited young colt. The bit was out of her mouth! She was free, free to do as she liked for a couple of hours. One lightning glance round told her no one was in sight, the orchard looked empty, only fowls and the chained house-dog at the stables, as far as she could see, to observe her. She solemnly turned a somersault. Then, having come to a sitting position safely, she stayed, her hands spread palm downwards flat on the ground at each side, arrested by the stillness and silence that to her were yet full of a sweet melody: along the shores of the Bay beyond the clearings made for orchards and farms, were stretches of bushland: the stark, white stems of peppermint gums, the blue-gray

HUON BELLE

of young eucalyptus, the deep green of box-trees and ti-trees and evergreen shrubs of all kinds clothed the land to the water's edge: there were strange clear-cut reflections of the far hills in the glass-still water, the little cluster of houses a quarter of a mile away that gave to the postal address the name of Belle Bay, a weather-board church, the big store, Kant's Store, the post-office, and the red boarding-house where she had asked first for work, looked funny enough to make a cat laugh upside down like that in the water! What if the people inside them had to be upside down, swallowing upwards! . . . The Belle was upside down too, poor dear! If she, Ginny, got on her head again and managed to balance longer like that she thought they might all look right ways up.

She had another reason, too, for wanting to stay balanced feet in air: there had been a much-used expression among the children of the settlement—"Oh, wasn't I just standing on my head with excitement!" Well, she *was*. Excitement *and* happiness at having come by such unbelievably strange happenings to such a home and garden as this. A seed from weeds, a seed of thistle down from nowhere, blown by rude winds from the bush that had germinated it, blown on disaster, away, away, uncertain of destination, till somehow guided, urged, fanned lightly, it was stayed . . . it settled. Here to bud when it had taken root, to open to the gracious sun, to blossom.

Presently, having satisfied herself about reflections, Ginny began to explore the ruined garden. It was one of those "had-been" gardens that hold tremendous fascination for the imaginative. Down from the back of the house to the water's edge a moss-grown path curved between straggling bushes of lilac and guelder roses, with their crimson leaves strewing the ground. There were tall laburnums with black rattling seed-pods; leaves, dead leaves everywhere, and great untidy clumps of evidently self-sown asters, larkspurs, cosmos.

HUON BELLE

Ginny's heart gave a little leap of ecstasy when she saw those whippy dead stems, for on the slender sprays goldfinches were swinging: they darted from clump to clump, dipping quick bills to pick out the seed, twittering, dipping, swinging . . . swinging. Oh, the joy in that movement! Sheer joy in watching rose and clutched at her throat. Her limbs felt suddenly light as air, filled with the enchantment of youth; she climbed the tallest and toughest of the laburnums, swarmed out carefully, carefully, as near the end of the longest branch as she dared and swung there, swung high, swung low; the goldfinches scattered from the cosmos into the distant blue: the tree bent and groaned to her weight, but drunk with a wild, thrilling sensation of flying, she swung higher, higher, clinging with her thin hands, until with a great crack the branch snapped as she went high up, and she found herself flung like a stone from a catapult through the air. . . . a jagged branch caught her thin skirt and she hung suspended a moment, the fall broken: then the stuff ripped from top to bottom and she fell, thump.

"Cats! What was that, did you see that, Mister Gilmore?" The hired man looked round the tree they were pruning far over the orchard, looked with a scared exclamation at his master.

But Cairns had caught sight of the blue overall, too, and was running for all he was worth towards the garden.

"Here, you Ginny! That's a pretty way to behave. A great girl like you climbing trees. Hurt yourself?"

"Not a bit—thanks." She was on her feet by the time he reached her, dusting the moist loam from her hands, furiously ashamed that he should have caught her, her cheeks crimson, her eyes flashing fire.

"Well, I was a fool to trouble to come over, I see," he turned on his heel, yet could not resist a glance over his shoulder at the picture she made of vivid life in that dank spot. Some day the little thing would be worth looking at

HUON BELLE

all right, with those splendid eyes. She gave him one of the quick side-ways glances from them that he was to become so familiar with, that drew while they kept him at a distance. A bleeding wrist where the branch had torn it, was held behind her back, her chin was well stuck out, she said defiantly:

"I better thank you for coming."

"Yes, you better. You might have broken your silly little neck. Don't you do that sort of thing again."

She gave a sudden laugh at the recollection, now that the first shock of that nasty thud as she met earth, was over, she *could* laugh. She said:

"I'm not likely to! I—I was pretending I was a goldfinch on a cosmos."

"Oh, you were, were you?" His iron features had almost forgotten how to smile, but somehow his mouth twisted into a grin. "Goldfinch, eh?" and he walked off, stumping with gaitered legs through the trailing rose brambles, stooping to cut them away with the secutus he carried.

That grin though had emboldened Ginny: she ran after him, asking breathlessly, while she tried to hold the ripped skirt together:

"Do you think I might tidy up the garden? Weed and that? I'd be mighty careful!"

"Do what you damn well please with it," the man told her. "I've got no time to see to it, neither has Charlie. Mother used to, but it's got beyond her, she's too old. Call it your own if it'll please you. Tools live under the verandah."

The child sent him a vivid, grateful look, such a look as no one had ever given him before. Queer little bird. He tramped off whistling.

"And didn't I think he was going to land on me just . . . and now, well, if I hadn't tried to be a goldfinch, I wouldn't 'a dared ask. *My garden!*"

That same night Colonel Severing from Sweet Water,

HUON BELLE

ten miles up the road, drove over to ask Gilmore if he would give his support to the new cool store that was to be erected in the district for storing apples when prices were low, so that they might be well preserved until prices rose. Few of the orchardists about were wealthy enough to build one for themselves, but if they pooled: the colonel was persuasive, but Cairns refused point-blank, was stubborn as a mule, couldn't be moved. The other rose at last to go, keeping his temper with difficulty.

"I thought I should find you with public spirit enough to put in a few pounds, say fifty. It's to all our advantages, yours as much as anyone's."

"When I can afford it I shall put a cool storage up for my own use. That's final, Colonel."

"Well, I'm sorry. Good-night, then." He rose to go. "You well, Mrs. Gilmore? Hullo, who have we got here?" as he caught sight for the first time of Ginny, who, when her work was done, had slipped in quietly to look at a flower catalogue she had found in the rubbish-box.

"She's a little maid that's come to help look after me and the house now that I'm beginning to feel my seventy years, Colonel Severing."

"That's nice for you. Fond of flowers are you, Missy?"

Ginny nodded at the kind, elderly face looking over her shoulder. "I'm going to neaten up the garden."

"That's right. I'll send you along some of my famous sweet-pea seeds. And I had some wonderful stocks if I've kept the seed, you'll want to sow it next month—in boxes."

So Ginny's first remembrance of the name of Severing was wrapped up always with flowers. For the colonel kept good his promise. She loved to think of that when the years brought pain that burnt like acid with mention of that name.

CHAPTER IV

BRINGS MENTION OF KANT'S STORE

ONCE convinced that Virginia Lee was an honest, willing, intelligent girl, old Mrs. Gilmore began thankfully to leave more and more of the household work and arrangements to her. She had muddled along with incompetent help, or with no one but her poor old rheumatically self, for so many years that it was like a foretaste of heaven to have Ginny running here and there with her quick, natty way of setting things to rights; to come out when the day was well aired to a warm, tidy room, the hearth swept, the chairs rubbed bright, the daily papers piled neatly instead of accumulating in mused sheets everywhere just as Cairns threw them at night. To be assured that he had gone off in dry boots to his pruning after a hearty breakfast, that his lunch had been sent out to him if he were ploughing. To find that this little bit of a thing picked up the dairy work as if she were born to it, so particular in scalding the milk-buckets and pans, so clever with the churning, no complaints from Cairns about the butter being rancid now: and such a hand for buttermilk scones as she had! Mrs. Gilmore's own mother had brought her up on the belief that to make good buttermilk scones light and spongy-soft (not like the Gourly woman's leather, they were, mind you!) was the hall-mark of a good cook.

She would sit with her bit of knitting, her feet comfortably settled on a hassock, wrapped with a shawl to keep them from draughts, watching and giving directions about the meals to a bustling Ginny.

HUON BELLE

"No one ever looked after me like you do, Ginny girl. It does my old eyes good to see you at your work. There's few girls in this part of the world as thorough as you are. Who taught you to be so neat and thrifty?"

"Why, my own mother, who else, Mrs. Gilmore, dear? She was Scotch, you know. She would have me thorough from the time I could stand up and wipe cups whiles she washed; and by and by, I did all the sweeping and everything for her, and she taught me to cook (all we had for our plain living), so that she could go to work at the mills with father. She cooked for the men."

"So she wasn't working on the mills long before——"

"Oh yes, four years. You see, she wanted to make enough quick for her and me to clear away—and you see what happened." She caught her breath.

"Now don't you fret about it!" the old lady coaxed kindly. "Why, just you look what the Hand of Providence has done for me by loosening the belt off that flying machinery? Why, I believe if I'd had a little daughter instead of one clumping son I'd have wanted her just like you."

"Oh, Mrs. Gilmore . . . you wouldn't really—truly?"

"Yes, but I'd have wanted her better dressed. Now you're coming with me this very day, for, gracious child, you've been here a week; time slips along as quietly here as a cat after a bird, all of a sudden old age and then death itself pounces on you; well, well, I think we'll be able to suit one another, so I told my son last night we would keep you. But have some decent prints and a warm dress or so you must. Now who made you that sketchy thing you're wearing this afternoon?"

"Mother cut it out of some—some ol' curtains, silk; she'd had 'em put away from Scotland, I think. It was my best."

"You can't call it anything but best-on-the rubbish-heap now. It's fit only for dusters. You'd not be such a bad-looking girl if you were fitly dressed."

HUON BELLE

It was the nearest to praise on her looks that Ginny had ever had given her. Her mother, soured by the world's treatment of her, didn't believe in praise. Words had been cold scathing things between her parents; Scotch expressions still had come easily to her mother's thin, straight lips: "Don't you be so forthcoming, my lass, with your wishing for pretties," or "I'm a dour woman not to be cajoled, miss," and a dozen times in the week, sorely impatient, she would exclaim: "Whiles I think you're clean daft, Ginny." But this gentle, easily-pleased old dear by the fire, saying she wouldn't be bad-looking.

She flushed with pleasure, exclaiming: "Oh, don't you think so, don't you?"

"Well, we'll see what can be done in the way of things, for your beautifying at Kant's Store," she said without committing herself farther as she rolled up her knitting. "Boots, too, you *must* have. Put on that decent coat you came in, and brush those uppers, and just you walk as flat-footed as you can so that I shan't be disgraced by your soles."

Presently they sallied out together, pleased as two children, for the old woman was so near to the end of things, and the girl so near to the beginning, that the simplicity in small dissipations bound by a little silver cord about very ordinary happenings, tightened round both, thrilling them in unity.

So Ginny's itching steps, that would have skimmed over the ground five times while she must keep pace with the shuffling footsteps of old age, curbed themselves with easy patience while she listened to tales of the inhabitants of Belle Bay. How the Saltashes had just taken up land and were clearing for an orchard, and seemed a nice enough couple, though poor as a rat's pelt; how the Lichfields and the Severings were the only real gentry, and even they found it hard to make a living off the land: how Peggy-Rose Kant had come to the Bay in 1903, four years ago now that was,

HUON BELLE

and had taken over the post-office and taken the big front room attached to their house next door and turned it into a shop; and there Peggy-Rose worked like a slave out of post-office hours trying to put by enough to buy a bit of land some day where they could be independant and eke out a living by growing enough flowers and vegetables to send to town to sell. And how everyone knew why, and pitied and admired her for it, and helped her all they could by buying from her rather than the Big Store.

"What is their reason?" Ginny asked, taking old Mrs. Gilmore's arm to help her over a particularly rough piece of road: a rime of frost still unmelted at past mid-day, whitened the edge of the pathway under the hawthorn hedge. They were almost to the store now, Ginny could see the sign-board, black letters, half an inch long—KANT'S STORE—painted on a whitened slab of wood that leaned against the garden fence: beyond it, bordering the wide path leading to the verandah, scarlet salvias blazed; there was always some flower to attract special attention in front of the shop all the year round; roses in summer; thousands, simply, of yellow primroses and daffodils in spring; this lovely scarlet now, and later the berried holly trees. It wasn't like going to a shop, Ginny thought, more like paying an exciting visit.

"What is their reason?" she asked again, lowering her voice.

"Well, it's her poor brother Tom," Mrs. Gilmore whispered. "You see, he's got what the doctors call softening of the brain, he's bound to go on getting worse, there's no hope, they say, in a case like his, his father was the same. But he's as docile as a child, and he just worships his sister. He can do a lot for her, too, he's wonderfully clever with his hands, for he fitted shelves all round the room she took over for her store, shelves from floor to ceiling; but it makes me sad to think that good girl Peggy-Rose won't marry young Lichfield because of Tom . . . but here I am babbling, and Cairns says I'm always babbling!" She shut her mouth and

HUON BELLE

would tell no more that day, for she recalled suddenly how her son had taken her aside before dinner to say: "Look here, mother, if you are going to take Ginny into the Store as you say, you needn't go telling her all the gossip of the place, I know what an old babbler you are. We don't want her to get mixed up with the people here, she'll go leaving us or something if you do. I've no use for half the folks in the Bay as you know, what I mean is, work's more important than mixing up with your neighbours' affairs. . . . And another thing, don't you go telling anyone where she's come from. We can keep it dark that she came from the timber-mills settlement. The Belle Bayites know no one from the settlement, and I've spread a rumour that she came to us from town, see? It's no business of anyones how the girl got here, if they once get wind of it they may send word to the settlement, and then they'd be coming after her or something. We don't want to lose her, do we?"

"No, oh dear, no!" She had been frightened into seeing the point of his reasoning.

"Well, you keep mum in the Bay. Ginny herself won't be likely to say: when she asked for work at the boarding-house she kept quiet about where she'd lived, for I found that out from her at once. So you just keep it in."

"Yes, yes, I won't tell!"

But her old tongue did so love a tale: there would be all the sensation of that horrid accident to relate, and how the child had come in the dark to the door, half-starved . . . and the perfectly astonishing comfort she was turning out to be. Still, Cairns was right, there was every reason (more than she guessed) for keeping the whole business secret; above all, the settlers must never come trying to get hold of Ginny. The girl herself would tremble at the thought, you couldn't tell, but they might make up some story and take her back.

So she squeezed Ginny's arm and whispered as they turned

HUON BELLE

in between the salvias: "If I were you I wouldn't let them think you're a bush-girl here in the Bay, they wouldn't have much respect for you, would they, now? Supposing we tell them that you're just a little friend of ours from town come to live with us."

"I'd like to do that," Ginny said gratefully. "It's very kind of you to say so. You're far the kindest friend I've got, anyhow."

When they stepped from the verandah into the long, low room with its pleasant sunny windows at one end and its rather exciting smells of bacon and coffee, mixed with the slight stuffiness produced from the piled shelves of dress materials suitable for country fashions, of shoes and boots, of "blueys" and blankets, and of so many more things than the child had ever seen together in one room before, Ginny expected to see someone very big and important, somehow, as the proud owner of it all, especially a someone with a poor, short-witted brother in the background giving her a certain quality of importance: but instead, there stood behind the improvised counter a small, round woman, with one of the sweetest, shyest faces she had ever imagined. Dimples came and went continually by the left corner of Peggy-Rose Kant's mouth as she talked and laughed: she was doing both now while her small hands flew, tying the strings round parcels, unrolling sheeting, cutting rashers of bacon, for the shop to Ginny seemed buzzing with people, who turned when old Mrs. Gilmore made her way in, followed by the girl.

"Well now, here's Mrs. Gilmore, I declare!" a woman holding a baby exclaimed. "We don't often see you out doing a bit of shopping now-a-days. You're looking mighty spry for your years. How's the rheumaticks?"

"Oh, getting on well now that I'm having such an easy time of it at the farm, thanks for asking Mrs. Saltash. I've my little friend, Ginny, looking after things for me, you may have heard."

HUON BELLE

It confused Ginny to find everyone looking round at the words. She dropped her dark eyes. All Mrs. Saltash and the rest of them could see was a thin, shabby little figure with a white face so devoid of expression it evidently belonged to a nonentity. Nothing interesting to be seen in this queer newcomer, about whom there had, of course, been some talk: but then, you couldn't tell with town girls: unhealthy-looking, starved, this one certainly was. The intent glances veered away from Ginny to her intense relief. She heard a clear voice say:

"Are you in any great hurry, Mrs. Gilmore? Or can you wait until I have finished here."

"I'll wait, thanks, Peggy-Rose. No hurry at all. I'll just rest awhile after the walk."

"Then you must go and sit in the dining-room on a comfortable chair. You'll find Tom in there, he will like to see you. Yes, take—Ginny, is it?—too."

They went through a door she opened at the back of the shop into the Kant's living-room. There, with his back to them, standing in front of a shelf filled with books, stood a slim, stooping man. At his sister's "Tom, dear, here's kind Mrs. Gilmore to see you," he turned slowly and came across to shake hands. Ginny held her breath at sight of his face, it had about it such a quality of innocence, such a strange, *unoccupied* look, there was no other word, and yet it was so beautiful in outline and feature that she could have cried out in pity for the diseased brain behind.

He said very gently with a funny accent on certain words that made them difficult to understand:

"I am al—lways so pleased to see Mrs. Gilly."

"I know, Tom. I wish you and Peggy-Rose would come more often to see me."

"I'm frid—frightened of the man," he said shivering. "Frightened of Cairns."

"Oh, bother Cairns," Mrs. Gilmore said tartly. "You

HUON BELLE

can come when he's out at work. Come some afternoon to see Ginny and me." And she beamed round at the staring child.

Tom Kant smiled, a delightful, easy, lip-curving smile: Ginny could have run over to the poor dear as she termed him to herself, and hugged him, when she caught the smile directed to her.

"I'd like to. I—I—I—will," he stammered. "I think she looks a dear liddle girl. Peggy-Rose will think her a nice liddle girl."

At that moment the door opened and his sister came in; again that lovable smile broke over his face. He went up and kissed her.

"So you like your visitors?" she asked, patting his face. "Well now, thank goodness they have all gone, Mrs. Gilmore. Come along and we will see what it is you want before I have to be back into the post-office at half-past two."

"Well, we want to set Ginny here up in the best you can give us, Peggy-Rose, my dear. She has come to stay with us a bit short of clothes. Prints, and get us a nice, warm blue serge; she tells me she can make them up herself, isn't that clever of her now? And we want boots—and let me see, some of that madapolin for nightdresses; dear, dear, we better get everything while we're about it!"

An hour afterwards on the way home, carrying the kit she had brought full to the brim of indescribably satisfying parcels, Ginny felt happier than she had ever been in her life. It all meant that she *belonged*, that she had an independence that had never before been hers. She wanted to make this kind, kind old lady understand: she began stumblyingly:

"I wish—I want to say to you please, *please*, that I wish I needn't take any money for what I do in the house. You're so good to me—I can't, I mean I'd rather never have money now you've given me all these."

"You're trying to say that you'd work for love, are you, Ginny?"

HUON BELLE

She nodded quickly, her eyes bright with the tears behind them. "For love and a home and food. What else could I want?"

"I don't know, my dear. . . . I think it wouldn't be altogether honest of us, of me. And Cairns can afford to pay—why shouldn't he? But I tell you what I will do, I will put the money away he gives you—yes, indeed, take it you shall, Ginny, for who knows how useful it might be one of these days if you are wanting to marry or anything. I'll put it by for you without a word whenever he pays you (that part's nothing to do with me, you know) and by and by it will make you quite a tidy sum. But you and I, we'll not remember the money, we'll know that you just do things for me for love."

CHAPTER V

SHOWS HOW SOUND CARRIES IN THE NIGHT

YEARS, happy, work-filled, healthy years slipped past at Hill Farm; the orchards grew and increased in value; more land was cleared, more apple trees planted: the older trees bore wonderful sheets of blossom, perfect fruit. And something was happening to Ginny.

Happening soundlessly, gradually, inexorably to both body and mind. She felt often tired, but more often pricking with the pins and needles of exciting sensations. And she was for a time something she had never been before, moody . . . in the heights or the depths, full of lassitudes in springtime; like the trees, she felt the stir of Life. Growing pains, the old lady called them, tranquilly, for nothing worried *her* now. That fourth year of Ginny's life at Hill Farm she seemed suddenly to become very old, to lose her grip on life: the summer heat of 1911 tried her terribly, and as the months went by Ginny found her growing childish, wanting more patience and attention, wanting more protecting love than her son Cairns, with his hard, relentless nature, his aspect of "*quid pro quo*" to his fellow-creatures, could ever give her.

The entire management of the house was now left to Ginny; she took the weekly bills to Cairns for him to pay, apart from that, she was free to arrange her domestic concerns exactly as she chose, provided the master was comfortable and well fed; she became the daughter of the house; indeed,

HUON BELLE

Mrs. Gilmore, with her feeble old mind confused with illusions, became convinced that she had two children, a son and a daughter. She would say to the neighbours, when they dropped in to see her: "I must ask my daughter Ginny to bring you a cup of tea," or to Cairns, when he came in from the orchard: "Your sister Ginny has gone in to the Store to get that tobacco for you: not many men with such a good sister as you've got."

He would say grumpily: "Oh bosh, mother, get the sister notion out of your head, do. And I wish you wouldn't be so easy about letting her tramp the roads alone towards evening; she's not the kid she was, you know, she's growing into a fetching wench. I don't want the louts about making up to her."

"She is a good girl," the old lady would mumble, and dose off in her chair murmuring, "good little daughter, Ginny."

But if his mother's eyes were too dim-sighted to note the change in the girl's looks, her son's were not. For from the meagre, pinched faced child, with her narrow chest and skinny arms was developing a fine, deep-chested, tall woman. Her colouring was rich, the eyes, always beautiful, were so dark and striking in their intensity now that people made comment upon them wherever she went: her cheeks were soft and flushed with a smooth peach bloom, her lips were slightly pouting above the white, high-held chin. But it was the change in her figure that astonished even herself: soft curves, rounded waist, full bosom, that it seemed only yesterday, had been as flat as a boy's. . . . Cairns watching her through the smoke of his pipe in the evenings as she sat working or reading, found himself waking to desire. The girl would manage to place her seat out of his range of vision if she could, his eyes made her uncomfortable, but he would shift his chair without a word . . . and there were his eyes with their strange expression fixed on her again. She could feel hot blood mounting to her neck, to her cheeks, to her fore-

HUON BELLE

head . . . horrible sensation, making her heart thump. What was it? Why did he stare when he could tell she hated it? What did he mean by that slow, biting movement of his lips? As if he savoured something, tasted it. She would get up restlessly presently, stretch up to pull the curtains, or stoop with swift, graceful movements to pick up a ball of wool: he liked her to do that, it showed the full curves of her body. He would say sometimes: "You're growing a great girl, aren't you, Ginny? different from the little squib we took in—why, it must be nearly four years ago! Ever feel as if you wanted to live anywhere but here?"

No? Well, why didn't she make herself a bit more pleasant to him, eh?

Ginny's great eyes would meet his for a second, implore him, and then drop to her work. She wished old Mrs. Gilmore were not always sleeping now; she was no good at all, once she had sat between them and chattered: it had been easy then to say that she loved the farm and never wished to leave it, that her whole life and soul were rooted in this dear Belle Bay, that the Huon Belle had become as much a part of her life as the very air she breathed; that she adored it through all changes of light and shade and season, through the cold, dark of winter when the mountains seemed to draw away into a frozen remoteness; she adored it through the intimate warmth of summer when the colour of its familiar outline changed from violet to amethyst, from deep, gorgeous blue to pale smoke. She knew it would nearly kill her to leave it. The thought of what would happen when Mrs. Gilmore died appalled her. But you couldn't tell Cairns Gilmore any of these things. Some days she hardly spoke more than three words to him, or he to her.

The Tasmanian twilights are long, purple-soft, and dreamingly beautiful. All through that hot summer when Mrs. Gilmore began to fail so perceptibly, she loved Ginny to play the piano to her in the evenings: and that alone showed

HUON BELLE

what the years had accomplished in the development of the bush-child. 'Take a peep backwards and you will see Peggy-Rose and Tom Kant making up their minds to help bring out what was sleeping dormant in Ginny. She was worth helping, the soul behind that starved, intelligent face had begged help.

So Tom taught her music, and his sister in her rare spare evenings, came across to the farm and together she and Ginny read Dickens and Shakespeare and poems, which they both dearly loved: Ginny who had hated and despised lesson-books, revelled in literature and committed whole plays and yards of poetry to memory to please Peggy-Rose. She could recite the whole of "Evangeline," and many of Keat's odes. But her chief delight was in music. In the shut-up drawing-room at Hill Farm there was a piano. Going in to dust one day, Ginny opened the lid and struck a note—another; then several together making a cord, very softly, as softly as a snowflake drifting to the grass. She found deep sounds and sharp sounds; she was so absorbed that suddenly she jumped when she became aware that Mrs. Gilmore was standing watching her.

"So you've found my old piano out," she said nodding, "I would like to hear it going again. It had a sweet tone once, but its out of tune now and my fingers have got too stiff for the notes. I could get the tuner when he's round this way next from town . . . and I wonder if you'd like to learn to play. Tom Kant, poor fellow, now, he plays beautifully when the mood takes him (those two must have had a first-class education, mark my words), if we could get him to take interest enough we might persuade him to teach you, and it would do *him* good and be a boon to Peggy-Rose."

It had all been fixed up wonderfully easily. Tom had taken a keen fancy to his "Liddle frien'" as he always called her, and he gave himself up to teaching her two afternoons a week with greater animation than he had showed in anything

HUON BELLE

for years. Ginny had a quick ear and a true, firm touch: very soon she was playing simple melodies: in two years' time her playing was one of the old lady's chief delights. She would sit nodding her head to such tunes as she knew in her youth: "Annie Laurie," "I'm ower young to marry yet," and the sweet, plaintive old "Londonderry Air"—always Ginny's favourite.



Reproduced by permission of the publishers, MURDOCH, MURDOCH & Co

HUON BELLE

OLD IRISH AIR

Oh, Danny Boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling
From glen to glen, and down the mountain-side,
The summer's gone and all the roses falling,
It's you, it's you must go and I must bide.
But come ye back when summer's in the meadow,
Or when the valley's hushed and white with snow,
It's I'll be here in sunshine or in shadow,
Oh, Danny Boy, I love you, love you so!

But when ye come and all the flowers are dying,
If I am dead as dead I well may be,
Ye'll come and find the place where I am lying,
And kneel and say an Ave there for me;
And I shall hear, though soft you tread above me,
And all my grave will sweeter, warmer be,
For you will bend and tell me that you love me,
And I shall sleep in peace until you come to me!

The music had a strangely disturbing effect upon the man. Although he told himself he had no time for "trimmings" as he called reading, outside the daily papers, or tune-playing, he could not keep away if Ginny were playing to his mother. He would take himself with his pipe and paper to a chair outside the open drawing-room window on summer evenings and sit with his feet (as often as not in the dim light), resting on Ginny's bed of mignonette. The mingled scent and sound stirred but did not soften him. He found himself craving to touch the maker of those sounds, to put his hands round her slender neck, to press her head back, back till she cried out in pain. . . . Cruel thoughts? Of course, he would be cruel when the time came! When the time came. . . .

HUON BELLE

The girl herself guessed something, he knew, but she was too ignorant, or too innocent, he was not sure which, to let him have a chance. She had a way of slipping away from him, noiseless as a mouse when he came into a room where she was.

But Ginny's instinct told her more than she let him see: it told her that although Cairns was thirty-seven, he was not too old to mean endless agitations to her.

Nights were the worst; for she, who had never been nervous, felt her heart hammer and thud at sound of the creepers tapping at her window: moonlight nights showed her a man's saturnine face grinning in the black shadows, the familiar deep-set eyes, the high, handsome head . . . she could not get them out of her mind.

One pitch-black night in March, when she went up to her room where the white bed had always stood for an emblem of peace and safety, she felt a terror of darkness come over her as soon as she put the candle out.

She was not a coward, but this awful knowledge, no, half-knowledge, of unseen forces! If there had been anything to take hold of. . . .

Great immensities of gloomy, black darkness pressed against her window-frame, came into her room, soft, purple-black without shadows: she had no blind or curtains, the window was always open. She sat up in bed trembling; it was too dense to see even the outline of the Belle.

She reached for the matches at last after she had tried to get control of her fears and was about to strike one to light the candle again, when she heard the stairs creak under a stockinged foot.

No one slept up here but herself. If it was old Mrs. Gilmore, sick, and Cairns come to tell her? It couldn't be anyone but Cairns. And he could have called up if she were wanted for his mother. She lay rigid with her open palms pressed to her face—listening. Listening. . . .

HUON BELLE

Breathless with listening to those stealthy sounds carried through the thick night. She would feign sleep, death, anything if he stopped at her door . . . if he came in.

Words, words in flaming letters leaped into her mind, burnt hot there. "Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night," she saw written, "nor for the arrow that flieth by day: nor for the pestilence that walketh in the darkness . . . because, *because* thou hast made the Lord, which is my refuge, even the Most High, thy habitation. . . " Ah . . . that familiar verse brought relief!

Her hands relaxed, returned softly to her sides under the bed-clothes. Habitation . . . habitation, there was no one in this habitation but a helpless old woman, herself, and a *man*. There was a man in her room—she could hear the strange passion in his laboured breathing, it filled all space, it came close to her. If she should forget for a moment—"oh, *because* the Lord which is my refuge!" and scream aloud? Who would hear, or help, if she did scream?

"Ginny? Awake, Ginny?" The whispering voice of Cairns.

She forced her breathing softly, regularly.

"If she's asleep," the mutter carried in a tiny channel of sound, "if she's asleep I shan't touch her."

She clung to the psalm in thought . . . how did it go? "There shall no evil *no evil*, befall thee."

Once again he whispered her name hoarsely, but he did not move nearer, or strike a light.

And presently, it seemed hours, she heard a creaking on the stairs that meant he had gone down. A door below closed gently.

In the morning she met his quickly averted, and was it questioning, glance? with serene indifference.

She was never in her whole life going to let him know what knowledge the night sounds had carried to her. A new dignity came to her bearing, a something that put shame

HUON BELLE

into him. He feigned to lose all interest in her. But he said again grimly to himself: "When the time comes."

That day, however, Mrs. Gilmore had a stroke.

The doctor was sent for and gave his verdict.

"Not at all unexpected," he told them. "She may live for months yet, with her constitution. But you must not leave her alone, Ginny: bring a bed and sleep in the room with her here. There's nothing much one can do for the poor old body but be kind to her, and I need not tell *you* to be that."

So the white bed, and the window looking out towards the infinite aloofness of the Belle, knew Ginny for a long, long time, no more.

CHAPTER VI

DESPERATE LONELINESS OF VIRGINIA LEE

GINNY was four years exactly with old Mrs. Gilmore before she died. The old lady lived for only four months a helpless invalid, after the stroke she never left her bed again.

The very exaction and dependence that characterized her illness were a safeguard to Ginny. She spent as much time as she possibly could with her in her room. Charlie, the hired man, saw to it that her work was made as easy as possible by keeping the fires going whenever he was working near the house, by taking as much of the dairy work as he could off her hands, and by doing a dozen thoughtful little things a day for her.

But she was almost virtually alone for the entire day, always with that immovable, silent figure, lying in the big, four-poster bed in the front bedroom: sometimes Ginny would feel her spine creep as the eyes followed her with their strange stare. What thoughts were behind those eyes? Or was the mind just a blank? Sometimes the sick old woman tried hard to speak, would motion Ginny to her and make thick sounds, terrible sounds to the girl, who could make out nothing and would have given the world to understand. She would nod and smile, pretending she knew what it was, and Mrs. Gilmore would grow quiet, content to sink once more into that dreadful immobility that was not life and was not death.

Once a day, usually after the mid-day meal, Cairns would



Where boats were loaded for transshipment at Cairns Gilmore's jetty, in apple-land.

HUON BELLE

put his head in at the door and say: "Hullo, mother, getting on all right." Sometimes he went over to the bed and stood looking down at her, meeting her queer, blank stare. Ginny never could tell if she was aware of him or not, she gave no sign, made no attempt to say words as she did with Ginny.

Who could tell in what far spaces that mind wandered while the body lay chained. Poor old work-worn body, Ginny thought with tender pity, how it had endured and toiled and struggled for the husband and son who had taken what she did for them without one spark of gratitude. Hard, impatient creatures men . . . always plaguing women, taking from them by right of their sex, submitting them to profound unhappiness rare happiness. She thought of her own mother; and realized with revulsion that her intimate knowledge of men gave her but a thin opinion of them. In books she read of fine men of noble character who did chivalrous things for women, but did they exist out of books? In the intimacy of their own homes, when all the first thrill of love making was over, did they drop into the rut of masculine tyranny that meant meals, work; work, meals: with the variations played by bad temper or good.

Sometimes in rare talkative moods Cairns would tell her about his work on the Farm, what he intended to do in the way of clearing more land to plant further orchards that winter, how he meant to sow what the district referred to as "green stuff," rye grass, lucern, clover, so that he could increase his dairy stock. She learnt from him, too, that he had at last managed to secure Gourly's farm adjoining his own, for at last it had come into the market at the death of Old Ben Gourly.

"Obstinate old beggar," Cairns growled, "can't think why he wouldn't sell years ago before it went all to rack and ruin: it's going to cost me a pretty penny to get it into running order after all these years of neglect, I can tell you. But he

HUON BELLE

had some grudge against my father for taking mother from under his nose, and wild alligators wouldn't induce him to sell . . . he knew well enough I was waiting to snap the place up. It's going to make Hill Farm into a really valuable property, Ginny, my girl, once I get the dividing fences down and the sheds put to rights. . . . I shall have to grub up half his codlin moth-riddled, diseased orchard. Must start clear and fair with the land."

He would sit drawing diagrams on paper, blocking out plans for the hundred acres he had added to his own farm.

Land! How he loved it. If he had a vice, a greed, it was this love of land. Ginny found it the one thing she could admire in him, this concentrated aim to improve the land.

And in Belle Bay he was spoken of as the coming man of the district: looked upon, too, as a great catch by the girls there, a healthy, crude, hearty type of country lass; and a hard-working, good breeding lot, Cairns told himself coarsely, but with no attraction for him. They were the sort that in a few years would develope red pudding faces, become broad in the beam, demand a fur coat and expect him to keep a servant for them. He knew!

They had never made friends much with Ginny, she kept herself aloof from them, always had from the time she began work for Mrs. Gilmore, she knew perfectly well they all looked down upon her for that reason: it seemed so silly to her, for they worked just as hard and at the same domestic tasks as she did: with the difference only that they worked for their parents, *their* fathers' owned the land, were what are known as "cocky farmers," whereas *her* father they were aware, had been an employee, not an employer.

All the difference. For tales about Ginny's parentage began to be handed mysteriously about that fourth winter: perhaps because her looks had begun to attract attention: perhaps through a man who often came into the Bay taking

HUON BELLE

down orders for box timber for the apple cases, a new industry just starting at the mill settlement.

But all intercourse with the neighbours was definitely put an end to by the illness of old Mrs. Gilmore. Cairns let it be quite clearly known that he did not want visitors uselessly flocking round his mother. There was nothing absolutely to be done for her, and it only meant they were taking up Ginny's time. It never seemed to strike him that the girl would have been thankful for the break visitors made; the Kant's she longed to see, but he put an end preemptorily to their coming by saying the doctor had forbidden any noise; the piano was silent, books seldom opened. Ginny's days drifted one into another so hushed, so monotonous, with so little change to mark them that she sometimes felt as if she were living in a dream.

Then one day that had begun the same as all the other days of that strange, still autumn, the old lady quite without pain or effort, ceased to breathe; a deep sigh, a flicker of the lids, and she had gone. . . . Ginny, folding some towels over by the sunny window turned with some premonition of change. She went over and spoke her name, put her hand on the forehead . . . then drew back in distress as her instinct told her what had happened, it was like touching ice—ice; as her mother's hand had felt that tragic day when they brought her back from the mills.

She ran to call Cairns from the packing-shed. . . . After that the hours moved heavily along. She felt as she imagined one would feel with a mutilated body; some vital part was missing: she could not now believe Mrs. Gilmore's querulous old voice, that she had learned to love so dearly, would never be raised to call her again: she had to remind herself that the spirit that had first made a home for her here in its gentle kindness, had flown.

But not until the afternoon was drawing in with a chill hint of frost to come, had she time to sit down and try too

HUON BELLE

realize what it all meant to her. With his mother gone would it be possible for her to stay on with Cairns, would he want her to stay?

And thinking of that night in the summer she knew it would not be possible to stay. Loneliness suddenly streamed over her in a great devastating flood, washing away all the landmarks of home she had set up: she had no home, she was adrift once more, the mooring rope severed again by death's sharp scythe. Unable to keep still she went out through the darkened living-room, into the garden she had reclaimed from a wilderness of tangled weeds and straggling bushes. It was ablaze with June flowers, still, the leaves of guelder rose trees and sumachs flamed above the dahlias growing in tall clumps of yellow and crimson beside the path, with tawny chrysanthemums, lupins, and late spikes of delphiniums thrust blue points among the masses of asters, it was a garden of colour more than of form, of homely sweetness more than of trimmed virtue. On either side the orchards stretched pale gold and scarlet along the banks of the Bay, and the waters lay like a great blue mirror holding the reflection of the trees like the unwavering flames of candles, while far in the distance at the head of the Bay, stretched the lazy length of the Huon Belle drenched in the last sunshine.

Sobs caught in Ginny's throat. "You darling beautiful," she whispered, "it is not possible, it breaks my heart to think of living away from you." She had made a seat at the end of the garden where it sloped steeply to the water, a seat from a log, with a twisted back of willow wands; often in the afternoons, before Mrs. Gilmore had her stroke she would take the basket of darning, or the linen to be hemmed, and sit there for an hour, watching the lights change on the hills, or the clouds sailing like white swans. She sat there now, her chin cupped in her hands, huddled together with her tear-dimmed eyes fixed achingly on the ranges. She had drugged herself into a semblance of calm when the sound of a voice

HUON BELLE

calling sent a sharp pang through her heart. The voice of Cairns Gilmore. The voice of the man who held her future in the hollow of his hand. In the supersensitive mood she was in, it sounded to her as if he were already showing her that she was in his power. His tone rasped:

“Ginny!”

“Down here by the water, Mr. Gilmore.”

He came and sat beside her on the seat, pipe in hand.

“Mr. Gilmore,” he mocked, “Mr. Gilmore! You can drop the mister, Ginny. All this business of the old lady dying is going to make a big difference to you.”

She sat very still, clasping one hand over the other in her lap.

“A big difference—and the sooner the better. We don’t want people talking, do we?”

She shook her head and shivered, wondering what he meant. It was obvious the difference it would make so she did not answer in words. Besides, she felt more numb and lifeless than the Belle over there, *she* palpitated life, for the evening sky was moving with glowing rose and carmine colours that stained the mountains and gave them the flush of life. She forgot him for a moment as she threw back her head to see the pageant of coming night; nothing that was not beautiful, nothing that was not exquisite mattered to her while she lost herself in that fast fading sea of colour: like flower-petals dropping the clouds faded one by one: last night her old friend had stared with unblinking eyes at the sunset: *she* was gone: soon the flowers in her garden would fade and die as the sky flowers faded.

As for man, his days are as grass

As a flower of the field so he flourisheth

For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone

And the place thereof shall know it no more. . . .

“Shall know it no more,” Ginny’s heart whispered. “No more.”

HUON BELLE

Forgetting Cairns, she turned and laid her head down upon her arm on the back of the seat and burst into tears.

While he drew at his pipe Cairns had been watching her through half-closed eyes, calculating, weighing. Better go the whole hog now that he had begun. He could see only one way of making certain of Ginny, to marry her.

Until this last year, when she had begun to show signs of real beauty, he had hardly thought how he would keep her at the farm, but from the first when he found the kind of worker she was he had made up his mind that she was to be a cog in the wheel of his ultimate success; he knew, none better, the quality of those who worked for him: he knew also that the core of a country-man's success is peace and order in his home. He had seen men fail over and over again, grow sick of the land and its exactions because their homes were rotten with discomfort, cold, disease; loss of all vital interest followed. The name of marriage meant little to him besides the bringing into a man's life someone who could be and do for him, decently. The idea of a comrade, a companion on equal terms never for an instant entered his mind: he faintly despised all women, all the same, the world by some silly clumsiness in its making, could not get on without them.

But here was Ginny growing into a woman a great deal more desirable than any it had been his lot to meet, ready to drop into his hands. Whether those hands were fit to receive her he was not going to ask himself. He would have laughed in amazement in your face had you suggested it. Certainly his mother had managed to tie her by invisible strands, affection, gratitude, and what not, but he meant to tie her by something more concretely binding than that—marriage laws. Marriage laws. He repeated the words, discriminating the difference they would make between a paid and an unpaid servant; and was about to give Ginny the reason for the difference all this business of dying meant, when that sudden

HUON BELLE

burst of tears made him stare at the shaking figure beside him aghast.

"What the devil——" he began. But it was better to wait for her to pull herself together. Which she did in a very little while, ashamed and agitated that he should have sat witness to her weak tears.

For a time neither spoke, then he broke the silence with a question.

"Have you made any plans? You can't very well stay here without——"

He made a significant pause. Her smouldering agony of loss went through her again with those words, "You can't very well stay here."

But he was speaking again, and although his voice seemed to come from a great distance, she caught their astounding meaning.

"Without—unless, that is, you—marry me."

She sat stone still, trying to digest in one mouthful as it were, the whole vast meaning of those few little words.

Marriage with Cairns. That would mean she would be Mrs. Gilmore, Ginny Gilmore, with a name of her own and a home of her own for ever; and the home would be Hill Farm with the darling Huon Belle always, for life, until death closed her eyes as it had the last Mrs. Gilmore's, and she could see the Belle no more from anywhere.

Ginny's mind, her reasoning mind, saw perfectly well that she loved the farm and the Belle far more than she loved Cairns, though she was matured in many ways beyond her years, her passions still slept: all she knew was that the interests of her life were comfortable, well-ordered interests, just as the man beside her knew. Work meant happiness, pride of house, of orchard, of chickens, and dairy, meant a level, contented happiness. She knew in that instant that she was satisfied to give herself to Cairns in exchange for the privilege of serving his house, of calling it her own: and

HUON BELLE

above all, of being able to keep the infatuation that was as a secret burning censor always swinging before her eyes, the adored sight of the Belle. Ever deeper, ever sweeter her love had grown, a steady, satisfying love that no one yet had come to supersede.

Yes, of course she would give her body to Cairns if she might gain all that!

"Well?" At last he prompted her reluctance, though he was in no undignified hurry. For he knew perfectly well what she would answer. "Made your mind up yet? Going to let me be your Boss for life. No more locked doors, Ginny."

She raised her eyes, still red-rimmed from their tears, to his face with its look of certainty and knowledge. Marriage would mean—that. Her eyes did not drop before his. Her decision was made; about this child of the silent timber forests was a steadfastness that it would take more than Cairns Gilmore or his like to break into. She was ready to face anything for the Belle.

"I'll marry you," she told him simply. "Thank you."

He gave a short laugh at her thanks. Queer kid! He said, getting up: "Then we better make the wedding the end of the week. Soon as the funeral's over. I'll have to go now and fix things up." And he turned on his heel.

CHAPTER VII

TELLS WHAT THE MAN FROM THE SETTLEMENT TOLD CAIRNS
GILMORE

CAIRNS found it was necessary for them to go to town to be married as it was to be carried through at such short notice, and at a registry office. Ginny did not go from the farm at all until after the funeral, and Cairns stopped anyone coming to the house: so that no one in the Bay knew or guessed anything of the approaching marriage; he had his own reasons had Cairns for not wishing it to be discussed until they were quietly back again man and wife. With unerring truth does it avere in Proverbs that there are "many devices in a man's heart."

But on the evening of the day that old Mrs. Gilmore's small funeral procession had left its wheel-marks through the gate, winding its slow way up the hill to the cemetery, that evening, when Ginny was sitting alone on the verandah, with Cairns a mile away on a last inspection of Gourly's Bit, as it was always called, Peggy-Rose Kant came silently round the corner of the house.

"I had to come," she said, pulling Ginny up from her cold seat. "I couldn't bear to think of you sitting here alone to-night. Poor darling, how terrible it has been for you here all alone." She would have drawn her into her arms, but the girl held stiffly back.

"What's the trouble that you can't let Peggy-Rose comfort you?" the older woman asked. "I've been thinking of you so much, but it was no use trying to force a way in

HUON BELLE

against Mr. Gilmore's wishes. Are you hurt with me for keeping away, Ginny?"

"No, oh no, there's been too much to think of."

"I know. And now I've come to offer you a home with Tom and me, if you like. I should be most glad to have you. Now don't shake your head until you have thought it over. You can't stay here, can you? I mean, you can't be thinking of staying at Hill Farm without the old lady to keep you company."

"Yes, I can."

"Ginny dear, I don't like—that is, I don't think you should, it's hardly well,—nice. And you will be horribly lonely. Better come to Tom and me."

Her arms went round the girl again as she spoke, and she felt the long shudder that ran through Ginny before she gave her important news.

"Peggy-Rose, I've promised to marry Cairns. We're going to town on Friday, that's to-morrow, isn't it? And when we come back I shall be Mrs. Gilmore, with a right to stay here for the rest of my life. Here, in a home of my own. There's no reason I can't do that, is there?"

Peggy-Rose held her tight while the words that were spoken quickly to their defiant climax. Yet she could have cried, she could have shaken the stiff arms held to the sides of this arrogant girl beside her.

Did the child want to impress her? She had certainly taken her breath away. Such an arrangement as Cairns marrying anyone as young and mobile as Ginny had never entered her head. Iron and wax, granite and putty, what could come of welding them together? It had always seemed to Peggy-Rose that there was something pitifully young at the back of Ginny's mature ways, as though she was younger than she would have you think. She held her from her now and looked with tender eyes at the lift of Ginny's chin, the blue fire back of her eyes, smouldering fire.

HUON BELLE

"You poor waif!" said Peggy-Rose. "You unfledged bird, creeping into the first nest that offers."

Then at last Ginny relaxed and let herself be drawn for comfort into the warm arms that waited. "Don't, don't," she sobbed. "I must be here near the Belle. I must have a home, I *must*. You don't understand . . . there are things I ought to tell Cairns, but I can't. *Can't*. When he has married me it won't matter, I'll be his property, I'll *belong* to someone. Oh anyone like you can't know what it is not to belong anywhere. Don't say what you're keeping it at the back of your mind to say, that I shall regret."

"Can't you tell *me* the things, Ginny?" The voice was urgent, the question hung suspended, as if by cutting into her confidence the whole fabric of this grotesque marriage would fall.

"No, no, I can't tell anyone. It's nothing that can hurt. They are quite a—quite common things, but you can't tell how it might change him. It will be all right when I've married Cairns. He won't care then, I won't let him. I'm going to work for him like a servant for giving me a home, but I'm going to make myself his equal, too." Ah, iron and wax. The woman who held the clinging figure said no more. To every one their own fight. She became practical, even encouraging.

"Well, you may be right. We haven't said a word about love, but the old wives say that comes as naturally as thaw after rain. And if there's to be a wedding, Ginny, I'm going to have a finger in the pie, even though you say you're going to town away from us to give yourself to your man. I'm going straight away to my store and I'm going to look you out the prettiest things I've got in stock for your wedding . . . only to-day I unpacked a blue coat and skirt that should be just your size. I'm going to make you a present of it, Tom's and my wedding present."

HUON BELLE

"Oh, but I can afford to buy things," Ginny told her with pride. She took Peggy-Rose by the hand and, lighting a candle, they went up the creaking stairs until they came to Ginny's old room. Shutting the door, she put the candle on the floor, and kneeling beside it, opened her mother's old suitcase, that with a quick look at Peggy-Rose, she had pulled from under the white bed. There were bundles and bundles of old letters, old treasures, and hidden beneath them was a calico bag full of the ten-shilling bits that were in use before the War.

"All my weekly wages," Ginny said, holding the bag up, "ten shillings a week for four years! Old Mrs. Gilmore would not let me spend it: the dear gave me any money I wanted for small things and gave me my clothes, but she said some day I would be glad of this. The day has come, and I *am*."

So she and Peggy-Rose slipped away to the store; and Ginny was back with her trousseau before Cairns had come in from his late rounds.

Clothes. She had hardly thought of clothes as of more importance than bread and butter, like it, they were necessities of life. But as her fingers lingered over the smooth, rich-feeling, blue cloth, the purple blue of pansies in the candle-light, something of the importance attached to clothes revealed itself to her. She saw herself, or rather the top portion of herself, reflected in the small, square of glass on the bureau; she looked immeasurably older in the tight-fitting long coat, the sight of her own full figure made her catch her breath; then she preened at the sleekness of the girl in the glass: she thought Cairns would like that girl, he liked neat finished things, everything on his property, fences, gates, fruit trees, sheds, had a well-finished look. And she was going to be part of his property. That was all that mattered now.

They were home by the tenth of June; July, August

HUON BELLE

passed busily by for Ginny. Through the cold, foggy days she kept warm with her constant activities. Anyone watching her might have thought she was afraid to stop work: work kept her mind as well as her body employed. In August she became quietly and radiantly happy, with a secret and certain knowledge. To be quite sure she went to see the Doctor, who confirmed what she was already certain of.

"I'm always glad to hear of expected new-comers to the Bay," he told her heartily. "What Tasmania wants is population. I'm hoping you and Cairns are going to fill that fine old farmhouse of yours. Plenty of room for girls and boys in those rooms. Think of the romps, eh?"

He was watching the glowing face of the girl before him while he spoke, interested and rather astonished at what he saw there. She had come to verify what most women were inclined to meet with mixed feelings, fear, distrust, resigned sighs, even open annoyance, but seldom this triumph and suppressed excitement. Ginny's whole air was one of satisfaction, of an implicit and beautiful fulfilment of hope; she might have been listening to an exquisite strain of music that she had just caught. How was the hum-drum old country doctor to know that she *was* listening. . . . To the first completely satisfying melody, the first whisper, of a life song.

Her Song of Life to the Huon Belle: her thanksgiving song.

Had not the Belle drawn her as a magnet from the gloom of the timber forests—brought her by chance (no, there was no chance, it was all premeditated), to Hill Farm? Bound her there more securely with chains of love, those invisible gossamer threads, each year: until at last she had climbed to the height where she could stand looking from under her hand at the days, weeks, months behind her (not an easy climb), free of any hold but that of a man over his wife:

HUON BELLE

free to say: "This is *my home*, the place where I have a right to be:" and now, in the weeks that would leap to their wonderful end at last, she was to feel within her the stirrings of the child who was to forge the most precious link, the link without flaw, in the chain. In those first links there had been always the self-conscious striving for a place, the restlessness that comes from a fear of expulsion, the dross of her own conscious aims had broken into the first clear notes of the Belle's syren song.

But now! Now was self put on one side her body was simply the chosen vessel which was to hold the perfect growing embodiment of her dreams: with the fruit of her body was to come completion of her right to the home of Cairns Gilmore. This child of his and hers would hold a hand of each, hold them together here on the land, in sight of the Belle.

So the Doctor closed the door after her when he had given her some little, though he felt hardly necessary advice, for keeping herself in health during her pregnancy, for she looked in bounding health, with the satisfaction of thinking that he had seen with his own eyes that the marriage the Bay had been inclined to shake dubious heads over, was turning out splendidly: he had never seen a girl radiate such unclouded happiness. Gilmore must be one of those rare fellows who reverse the saying: "Street Angel, Home Devil" . . . he was very evidently Home Angel; for Street Devil he certainly was, hardly a man, woman, or child could tolerate his mean self-absorbed ways in the Bay. Pity for Ginny was rife; "but quite evidently," Dr. McHyde thought, "she needs no pity. Give a woman a child and she thinks the father of it a god. A little more tolerance and we doctors would have less trouble over this pre-natal influence."

But it needed more penetration than the bluff doctors to see into Ginny's secret chamber.

Cairns took the news in the way that might have been expected: he said, looking at her morosely:

HUON BELLE

"I suppose it means that you want to lay up. You'll be asking for a girl to help next because you can't do this and that."

She flushed hotly. "Indeed I won't. I shall be perfectly well."

"I'm sure I hope so. I've a heavy year ahead with all this building leading to endless expence." And that was all: no expression of pleasure, no thought of what it would mean to be called father. Ginny would not let herself be sentimental, she told herself Cairns was not the sort of man to like children, he hadn't any imagination to picture what *she* could. He was tremendously busy over the building of new apple-sheds and a cool storage on his own property to be ready for the next year's apple crop: with the amalgamated orchards, his own coming along well and what was left of the good young orchard of Gourly's Bit, he expected to clear a thousand bushels. He had pulled down Gourly's ramshackle old farmstead and there on the site he was putting up long, low white sheds with red roofs. It gave the place a prosperous air, all those spick and span new buildings. Cairns was over watching the last touches to the painting when a man from the timber-mills settlement came to arrange with him about box timber. It was half-past nine on a bright August morning, the first spring bulbs were bursting their yellow dresses in the garden under the bare laburnums as Ginny walked through taking Cairns his lunch of tea and scones as she always did at that hour; with breakfast at seven a break was needed before he came in to the half-past twelve dinner, and it saved him time if Ginny came out with it. Humming as she walked over the rough ploughed furrows between the orchard trees, she enjoyed the keen air sparkling with a sunshine that was at last beginning to lose the thin cheerlessness of winter.

She loved the spring more than any other time, the adorable crimson bunches resting on the gray-green apple branches ready to open into dear white and pink apple blossoms, the

HUON BELLE

wattle's yellow, tight, hard balls shaking out into golden, fluffy deliciousness, the sweetness of sap rising, of life agitating to burst through and to lavish beauty with generous hands over the whole of the lovely surrounding world.

She found Cairns and the man with note-books in hand standing beside a pile of cases by the sheds. With a nod to the stranger, when Cairns grunted, "My wife, Todd," she put down the billy of hot tea on a box, told Cairns she would bring a second cup if he wished, was told that there was a tin pannikin left in the shed that would do, and smiling again, walked back through the orchard.

Till she was out of sight the man stared after her with a puzzled expression. "That wife of yours reminds me of someone, Gilmore . . . who the dickens . . . I know! Bert Lee's kid! I've been away travelling for so many years I've got out of touch . . . but that's who it is."

"Rot," Cairns said, pouring out a cup of tea and offering it to Todd, "that girl was with my mother for years before I married her: she's nothing to do with people up your bloody way."

"Well, all I know is I've never seen eyes like that before or since, they're the sort that haunt a chap. This kid I'm talking about disappeared after that accident that turned everybody up with horrors not so many years gone; but I daresay it couldn't be her, for she left a letter saying she was off back to Scotland to her mother's people. Everyone knew that she wasn't Bert's kid, anyway."

"Who's would she be?" Cairns had his teeth buried in a scone. They bit through with a vicious snap.

"Well, the tale went (and I've inside evidence and could prove it) that this immigrant Scotswoman met Bert Lee, who was down by the town wharves having a spree from the mills, the night she landed. She took up with him, I reckon she was out to pick on the first simpleton she found, and the next day they were married. Oh yes, they were

HUON BELLE

married safe as nails. But the baby came in a matter of six months, a fine, healthy full-time child . . . well, you'll agree with me it couldn't have been Bert's. Nature's not quite so darned clever as all that! though that Scotchwoman did set herself up to be a sister to the lord high muck, just about! Still, she managed to get a name for her child pretty cute. Virginia Elspeth Lee she called it. We called it Ginny; in the bush there's no place for ornamental orations like Virginia Elspeth. Ginny, eh? And at twelve years old, the age she was when both parents were wiped out at once by a flick from a flying log off the bench when the belt bust (his missus was standing by Bert holding the dinner she had brought him, like it might be your wife bringing you that tea just now). Ginny was nothing but sticks of bones, and eyes, for Mrs. Lee neglected her simply cruel as we all of us knew. Indeed, we more than thought that Ginny died in the bush. Stranger things than that happen in the big, greedy bush, Mr. Gilmore. Little bodies like Ginny's could be lying under the scrub and you pass by and never know. Anyway, we couldn't find a trace . . . there never will be anything to prove."

"No, there never will," Cairns said, emptying the last dregs of the tea from the billy. "She's more than likely a skeleton by now, she'd never get away to Scotland on a boat without you hearing of it; how many years ago did you say?"

"Four good years. Funny how your wife's eyes seemed to kick up the story. I wonder now——"

"Oh, stop driveling," Cairns said. "Let's get to work on this order. Seven hundred box ends, we said, and mind you, the timber is to be seasoned or back it goes. None of your green ends come to Hill Farm, see?"

That night Cairns stood over Ginny as she brushed out her long, fair hair. He had bottled up what he meant to say, had been going over stinging words all the evening in his

HUON BELLE

mind, but she was going to get them now. He glared down at her in silence: knowing something was coming, she tried to keep her thoughts clear, she kept on brushing, brushing rhythmically; the steady movement seemed to goad Cairns. He snatched the brush from her and threw it in a corner. Then, taking her roughly by the shoulders, he twisted her round facing him. His face, in the flickering light of the candle they undressed by, sent sinister shadows over his cold face.

"Did you recognize that man Todd?"

She nodded. No use to lie now. The padding footsteps that had dogged her, out of sight, but there dodging, hiding, these four years past, were in the room.

"A lovely lie you've been living," he snarled. "What made you pitch three years on to your age? You told me you were fifteen, if I remember. And you were a weedy brat of twelve."

She looked him deliberately in the eyes and nodded. Her gray lie had hurt no one that she could see.

"And you told us you were Bert Lee's kid?"

"I let you believe what everyone said. What difference did it make—to you?"

"You're a bastard. Did your fine Scotch mother ever tell you who your father was? A laird, perhaps? Or the Duke of Kilts?"

She took no notice of his sneers. She said quietly:

"She didn't tell me. But I have bundles of letters upstairs in her old case. My father was an artist who came to the castle where my mother lived." She stopped, looking away through the curtainless window to the Belle, the dark, understanding Belle who for years had known her secret.

"What was she doing living at a castle; kitchen-maid?"

"She was only child of The Cameron."

"The Camerons'. . . *The*——!"

"They call the head of the clan that."

HUON BELLE

"And you believe that a little jumped-up bush-imp like you is the daughter of an artist and a blue-blooded wanton, eh?"

"I've got to believe it. Letters can't lie."

"Not as lips can? you think. Well, we've wandered into a pretty mess you and I, my lady," he gave her a push that sent her reeling back on to the bed, and sat down beside her to take off his boots, "and there's just one thing I'd like to beg of your royal highness. Don't you ever let a word of this get about. We're going to *burn* all that evidence, see. No one's going to get a breath of all this scandal. I'd screw your neck first, you crawling, you *slimy little reptile you*, wriggling in here on your belly." Suddenly he gave a shout of laughter.

"And at this rate . . . oh, oh, oh, with that other lie of yours——"

She interrupted him fiercely with:

"I haven't lied about anything that really mattered to you. You have never asked for a thing I have not given. When you asked I gave. . . . Remember you took me without question for the work you knew you could get out of me. Be honest, Cairns. . . . I call the scales about weighted evenly. You've got me."

"You've got *me*, you mean, under false pretences! And you've got my child." He grinned like a satire at her. "And by the same token you will be the mother of a brat at sixteen. At the age your aristocratic mother was still in the schoolroom. Sixteen, eh? Fit mother for a child, aren't you?"

"Seventeen," Ginny cried passionately, "before the baby comes, seventeen, Cairns! Oh, Cairns, can't you see that what's past is nothing to the fact that the present is going to mean—everything."

But he had already rolled into bed and was lying with his back to the light.

HUON BELLE

“For God’s sake stop pantomime and get down to real life. Put that light out. Your past is of no more concern to me than that tallow stench; think I’m going to upset all my life for your mother’s rotten sins, do you? Understand that I’ve wiped what that Todd raked up from my mind . . . and you with it. You can stay and work for me. There it ends.”

What sort of a woman was she, Ginny wondered, lying wide-eyed, listening to her husband’s snores, that she could stay and swallow his presence: that she could even fall presently into a dreamless sleep: and rise to her duties on the morrow without a harboured bitterness? Only when she lifted her gaze to the Belle, rising queen-like from her swathes of mist, clean, undisturbed, did she know whence the strength and the power came.

PART II

CHAPTER I

CHILDREN OF BELLE BAY

LOOKING back in her mature years the very first thing that Prim Gilmore could remember sharply defined in the misty distances of childhood, was the colour, and the sound and the smell of the big packing shed.

In her mind the impression left on those three senses were as one: sense of colour mingled with smell, a cool, twilight green shot with the odorous piles of rosy and lemon-checked apples: sense of sound mingled with colour, the subdued, quick whisper of squares of tissue paper being twisted with lightening rapidity round the apples by hands that hardly seemed to touch the fruit before they fitted each apple tight and firm into the open cases before them: while around, above, and somehow *within* it all, was that bitter-sweet, stale-fresh tang that came from hundreds and thousands of apples. It hung there even when the shed stood empty of fruit in late winter; hung like a visible thick curtain, Prim thought, and invented a story to herself of how it was cruelly suspended there, dividing her life from the freedom of out of doors, from the cosiness of her home, shutting in that endlessly busy hive of workers.

For in after life the shed resolved itself into the form of a prison for her, a place where she imagined rebelliously that her development would be arrested, where she would be caught up in the wheels of its monotony of work, year in year out the same. Apples, apples, forever *apples*. She

HUON BELLE

couldn't conceive how the place gave her father—even her mother, such immense pride and satisfaction. . . .

Ginny Gilmore called her only child Primula. She said the name had a soft, lingering sound; that she loved saying it; and as the baby was love personified to her, she wanted it to have a name that she would never tire of saying. Her world was now simply a background, her home and the orchards of Hill Farm but the seclusion in which her child was to develop—by and by to open wings and fly beautifully away.

“Your fancies always *did* run off with your common sense,” her husband, Cairns Gilmore, the dictatorial owner of the finest orchards in Belle Bay, said grumblingly. “Well, Ginny, you can have your way. ‘The top brick’ of the chimney is yours, my girl. I suppose nothing I can do for you is good enough now,” and he stroked first her pale cheek and then touched the downy head snuggling into the curve of her arm. He stood looking down at them for a time without speaking, brooding, thinking, in that strange, close way he had; hands in his pockets, mouth down turned, eyes remote. What *his* plans were for his daughter no one could tell, for he revealed his schemes to nobody, not even his wife. Hard with his men, inhospitable to his neighbours, yet with it all, held as a man of justice and high honour; a man who worked like a slave himself and had a contempt for any living thing, whether man, woman, or animal, who slacked. He was proud of his perfectly tended orchards, proud of his good name, and now, seeing for the first time his newly born child, immeasurably proud of her and of his wife: they added to his sense of possession, they were his, his belongings, “and they two shall be one flesh” . . . the baby, lying there so contented, so untroubled about its welcome, gave him the most acute sense of his power. That atom, with breath, with a soul, was his to do what he would with, to train, to expand his theories upon, it wiped out with its curled tiny hand the hidden stain upon Ginny's maiden name. He chose

HUON BELLE

to forget, and so deep-musing he walked to the fire and held out his chilled hands, rubbing them until the harsh, work-roughened skin grated like a file, a habit that had once made Ginny want to scream; but not now, not now that she had Primula! She looked down at the head cuddled against her, then across at her man with a new light in her gentle deep-blue eyes, at his tall figure, at his sloping shoulders, one a little higher than the other, and at his face, so much more handsome in profile than full face, because God had intended him for an exceedingly good-looking man, and the devil had spoilt the plan by souring his expression and hardening his features until his mouth set like iron and the lines were cut into a forehead behind which no softened thought penetrated: for now, in middle life, his dark face reflected faithfully his dark mind. Was it too late to hope that Cairns would become more merciful through love and pride in his child?

Everything seemed possible to Ginny as she lay there in that contented blissful week in bed after the birth of her daughter: Cairns and his morose ways were more bearable, small irritations simply melted away, life stretched before her in a glorious secure pathway: she could only feel a heart-swelling, almost suffocating, triumph when they had told her after that day and night of long agony that a daughter had come. She had longed most terribly for a girl; from the beginning she had hoped it would be a girl.

Cairns had never said he hoped for either. He had ignored the coming of any child. But when, at the end, Ginny had so nearly died, he had been, to the astonishment of the Bay (whose dwellers gave him credit for only as much feeling as you could balance on a three-penny bit) plainly distracted. And then that unprecedented act of tenderness when he stroked her cheek and then his child's head.

Perhaps they were all going to be proved wrong, even the young clergyman, Gilbert Piers, who had shaken his head over the affair from the beginning. He talked his worries,

HUON BELLE

especially this one of the ill-assorted marriage, over with Peggy-Rose Kant; but she listened with the tolerant spirit with which she judged everything. He knew what he discussed with her would go no farther, and it was a relief to be made to see things from her sane woman's outlook. He was a comparatively new comer in the valley, whereas she knew the history of the Gilmores and the Saltashes, of the Severings at Sweetwater, whose orchards stretched from the Bay back into the hills three miles away from the Belle, knew Mrs. Worth of 'Zarepath's' tragic love story; knew the Lichfields, father and son, whose hopfields were the finest and richest in the district; knew, in fact, and related to him with humour, but never with bitterness, the faults and failings of them all. A cheerful optimist was Peggy-Rose, yet of all the children in the Bay, hers was perhaps the hardest life, for she lived with her poor, half-witted brother Tom, worked for him, slaved for him, in years gone by had given up her chance of prosperity and a happy marriage that she might devote herself to Tom: there were many who thought her a fool at the time, but as she argued to herself, there was only *one* of herself, while Angus Lichfield, her lover, had the choice of a dozen good girls for his wife, and she alone could be to Tom his stronghold and home-maker. People, when they saw her point of view, pitied while they admired her, and there was not a living soul in the valley who would not take their secret troubles to her in her cheery little cottage, knee-deep in its garden of flowers; for the Kants had at last been able to give up post-office and store, and been able to buy a little property of four acres at the south end of the bay known as Green Gates.

She had said to Mr. Piers one day:

"But I don't think the difference in age matters half as much as you think, truly, I don't. Ginny is old for her years, she is very adaptable, and at the same time so sweet tempered that even Cairns can't ruffle her; I'm certain,

HUON BELLE

she has too much gumption, too much colonial common-sense, bless her. You know quite well the doctors say: 'Wait till the babies come along.' With a creature as dependable on love as Ginny, babies will bring all the happiness she wants into her life."

Gilbert Piers nodded.

"You may be right," he said, "you usually are, Peggy-Rose, my dear. It would rouse that curmudgeon Cairns out of his broodings, too, put life into the house. It's a depressing place enough for a girl like Ginny to be shut up in."

"But she gets out and about the orchards, doesn't she? I thought she went and helped in the packing sheds or with the picking sometimes."

"Well," the man rose to go, looking about for his round, soft hat with a queer smile on his face, "well, our friend Cairns has taken it into his head that it is *infra dig* for her to be about with the workpeople; not the thing for his wife, d'you see? and as he won't hear of her driving the dog-cart, she has a thin time of it, pottering about the house all day, training that woman Bella, who is deaf as a post."

"Cairns and his position!" Peggy-Rose exclaimed in disgust, "what nonsense it all is. Don't we all work here in the Bay to get our daily bread? isn't the whole air of the place set in a simple key, and don't we want to keep it simple? Well, Padre, lets hope for the babies."

But as has been said, Primula was to be the only child to put in her longed-for appearance.

But even with her coming the whole routine of the household life at Hill Farm imperceptably altered. It happened quietly enough, small habits were changed, hours rearranged to suit the baby's hours, customs that you would have thought a year ago were as rooted as the laws of the Medes and Persians ceased to exist: until at last everyone came to realize that Primula was the centre, the only thing of vital importance in the house; that its master had set his whole heart upon her,

HUON BELLE

in short, that everything and everybody must give way to this idolized child.

At first Ginny, with a dozen new interests and mother feelings called into being by this scrap of humanity, was as completely concentrated upon the baby as even Cairns could wish, but as time went on she found her eyes being opened to much that in a less fine-natured woman might have led almost to jealousy at the way those tiny feminine hands groped for and were given things which had been denied her. She found herself watching with interest, sometimes amused, sometimes angry, the way the little creature asserted itself and claimed attention from Cairns, demanded things she had never dared ask herself.

If your eyes would follow Ginny through these pages, picture her as a woman slightly above average height, rather generously made, broad shouldered, large hipped; always with a conviction in her own mind that small women were of necessity more graceful and desirable, she tried to efface herself more and more as time thickened the lines of her figure and traced crows'-feet by the eyes under the thick, ash-pale hair that grew low on her forehead. In those blue eyes there lay always some hidden thoughts, thoughts that in the first years of her married life found vent only in one direction, her music. Into it she could pour her whole heart and soul, for there was no one in that house to interpret rightly the cry of loneliness that crept into what she played. Yet her habitual expression was one of tranquility, her large, characteristic mouth held no pettiness of thought in its lines, and in all the years she lived with Cairns her healthy mind caught none of his stagnation of cynical hardness. Perhaps she was too simple to follow the workings of his dark mind; perhaps she was too clever to look for the key that would unlock his secrets because she wished to keep her world clear and beautiful.

Once only did she discuss him ever so little, and that was

HUON BELLE

with Peggy-Rose, one afternoon, when she had taken the baby across to have a teaparty with the Kants. Tom, the most careful nurse in the world, had carried Prim off to show her his twin calves, and the two women sat out with their sewing under the lime tree on the lawn. The restlessness of spring was again in the air, bees hummed in and out of the honey-sweet blossoms above them, a faint breeze blew through the garden intermittantly, the flowers swayed and danced to the unheard tune of a thousand pipes calling, calling . . .

"I wonder," Ginny said breaking a silence, her eyes on some nesting swallows darting under the cottage eaves, "I wonder, Peggy-Rose, if the birds are really as free as they look. Are they bound by marriage laws do you suppose, rules of the air, rules of having to think, in routine, because they may not act as their impulses would urge them to act?"

"Tom says," the other answered, giving Ginny a quick veiled look above the sheet she was oversewing, sides to the middle, "Tom says that birds are the most rigid of all marriage law-makers, about mating. He says that there is no unfaithfulness among birds, no bullying, that each keeps by law to its fair share of work—except, perhaps, cuckoos, and those we don't have out here."

"I can tell you why then," there came an edge in Ginny's voice very seldom heard there, "it's because they have wings and know they can dart away under provocation to the ends of the earth, above the clouds. Wings," she went on, looking down with dislike at her heavy shoes, "what would I not give to have wings to take me soaring up into that blue space above the tops of the trees? One *must* see more clearly, think more clearly away up there. Earth clogs and muddles one's actions."

"No, no." Peggy-Rose put an impulsive hand out, "you've got not to let it muddle you, Ginny. Earth's full of beautiful things; hills, perhaps, have got in the way of your view, but they have to be climbed up, to be scrambled

HUON BELLE

to the summit of somehow, there's always something lovely the other side. But the air's empty. You don't want emptiness in your life my dear, you want things to triumph over, to fight, to blast your way through."

They laughed outright both of them then. Peggy-Rose was well known to have charges of dynamite somewhere in her make-up that blew every obstacle out of her path . . . and out of Tom's, too.

Once she had read in a gardening book by Mrs. Cran, "If you want anything *badly* enough it will come, only you must want it with your whole heart."

She printed it out and tacked it over the mantle-shelf in her bedroom, making it her motto . . . perhaps that is why she seemed always to catch success by its illusive wings, because she wanted things, attainable things be it said, though not luxuries, with her whole heart. She concentrated upon her flowers, upon her immediate surroundings, such energy, that they could not do but what she ordered.

To spend an afternoon in her bracing company was a tonic, and when Tom came back carrying Prim, pink checked and laughing, Ginny felt ashamed of her depression. She caught, too, the look of momentary envy on the sun-browned face of Peggy-Rose as she held out her arms for the child; if it had not been for Tom she might now have been the mother of Angus Lichfield's bonny children. Instead, she had made a half-acre of loamy soil round their cottage her nursery, the flowers were her babies. On dewy nights she walked there when Tom had tried her beyond endurance by his stupidity, and was calmed. If you wanted to give her a birthday present nothing pleased her better than a new rose or a packet of seed, or a pot plant. She received it with the quick, warm flush that meant she could not believe you had found out the very thing she wanted! She could never be grateful enough. And in time that garden of hers became famous in its small way, people, strangers, stopped to gaze

HUON BEULE

entranced at the massed banks of flowers above the river. She sold enough in the year to keep her household bills paid more steadily than the few fruit trees, and Tom's bees did, for she sent boxes of lilies of the valley to town, boxes of tulips, too, and asters to the mainland where the name of Kant became well known for quality and connected with the rarer blossoms in the florists' shops. She was the first woman who had the idea of paving her paths with slabs of stone from the river quarry, she built rock gardens, too, had a miniature lake for her water irises and lilies.

And all this was but the eighth of her work, for Tom, on his worst days, demanded as much attention as a child; but to see him now, so gentle, so to be trusted with Prim, made them forget the burden he was.

"She's growing such a liddle beauty I can't keep my eyes off her," he told Ginny in his drawling voice. "Here comes the Colonel troo de gate now! See if I don't ask him if she's not goin' to be de golden apple, de Belle of the whole of our Bay!"

CHAPTER II

THREADS WOVEN IN THE LOOM

COLONEL SEVERING had lived in town to please his wife until she died, because she could not bear the thought of country life without her children. When the Colonel reached the retiring age and was pensioned from the Indian Army he had counted on living with his family on some farm or orchard that he set his heart on buying in his home country of Tasmania. But on the voyage out, as luck (or fate, whichever you will), had it, a barrister from Sydney fell in love with his daughter Margaret, a beautiful girl of twenty-four, and with the marriage so soon in view they settled for the time being in town, where it was easier to make preparations. Then, in the summer following the wedding, his son Simon, who was to have gone in for medicine and was then at the University, went with a party of students to the east coast to read during vacation, and there placed himself in perpetual disgrace with his family by marrying the daughter of the fisherman with whom he was boarding.

From the world's, and from his parent's, point of view, it meant the end of everything for Simon. To the Colonel it meant that his only son had proved himself a clod, an imbecile an outcast. That all his careful training in self-government his English public school training, should bring him only into this! It almost broke his mother's heart, she refused to see him or the wife three years older than himself; refused to leave town for the isolation of the country. So it was that



The snow-peaked Cow and Calf. (distant).



HUON BELLE

the two elderly people who had counted on their children to be an interest to them were bereft of the companionship of both. Life-long discipline helped the man to show a stiff face, never to let people guess the depth of his disillusionment of his bitter disappointment, in this action of the son who had been the pride of his life: but Mrs. Severing, weak, pretty, delicate, simply went to pieces, refusing to the day of her death eleven years later to have a word to say to Simon.

But the boy himself had not acted on impulse alone. Simply he had at the last moment set his teeth, taken the bit between them, and bolted away from the course laid out by a father of whom he had always been afraid. Since boyhood, Colonel Severing had ground into his son with harsh insistence the necessity of following along the lines of duty, of self-control, no matter how hard the path; but to Simon, with more than his share of his mother's illogical obstinacy, it was wasted teaching. He was clever enough to reason out for himself that until some opportunity turned up he was better to follow the line of least resistance and do what they planned for him; but he hated the thought of being a doctor, wanted at the bottom of his heart to devote himself to painting, to writing, anything that might bring him, in the study of it, closer to nature and its hidden beauties.

And with all this at the back of his mind life grew terribly complex as he grew older; he loved his parents because it was easier to love than to hate them, but nothing would ever make him see things from their point of view: he wanted to work out his own original pattern, not have it cut to stock size.

It was just then, with his whole soul enamoured with the beauty and freedom of this new country after the restrictions of England, that he made his first visit to the east coast. Its charm laid its spell about him at once. It was just as if some hand had torn away the flimsy coverings from a perfect piece of statuary and showed him what they hid, what he had

HUON BELLE

always hoped to come face to face with. He saw for the first time that his life was his own to do what he would with; perhaps only God knows what every individual soul should do with his life, perhaps He *rules* what he should do, and although the agony of choice seems at the time to be ours, is it of a certainty ours? And that agony is so very often not the choice between two evils, but between good and good.

For Letty Tollant, poor girl, was good right through.

The evening that the party of four students arrived at her mother's house she was tired out with goodness, for she had no thought whatever for her own tired back, nor for the feet that had been running from early morning to save her mother all she could. The Tollant men, two sons and the father, made a comfortable living from fishing on the coast, deep-sea fishing, and cray fishing, and the five of them lived in an old rambling, timbered house overlooking a perfect sweep of snow-white sand and deep water that changed from jade to gorgeous blue, even as the light changed on the wonderful granite islands across the Bay. Letty, then, stood at the door to welcome these young men who had written to ask if they could be given any kind of accommodation for a month.

A shell-grit path made a white line to the open doorway, through which were to be seen the leaping green and orange flames of a drift-wood fire, for as kind Mrs. Tollant said in her comforting voice:

“They'll like enough to be chilled to the bone with this cruel sea breeze, and I know well what these young fellows are, thin as the paper they are forever scribbling on. Now Letty, my girl, help in with their baggage.”

Simon at that time was a great, overgrown, handsome fellow; he had a face that few girls could look into without feeling their heart quicken its beat, and when he wished, a wonderful charm of manner. He looked down into Letty's pointed, boyish, impudent face, and could not resist the temptation to exert that charm. “I could never allow a lady

HUON BELLE

to carry in my luggage," he protested, laughing; and although the others, who had been there other summers, only gave her a friendly nod, he insisted on shaking hands with both her and Mrs. Tollant. That was the beginning—and the end, as far as Letty was concerned. His gentle voice, his never-failing courtesy twined a secret net about her that she did not try to escape. Simply she drifted on the tide of her aroused feelings and sensations into a passionate love for him. There was never anything vulgar or common in the way Letty annexed Simon, no snatching or grasping at what did not by right belong to her, she took what he offered that was all, she gave all, but she never, to the end, expected all; never forgot that he was a colonel's son, she a fisherman's daughter.

And as for Simon himself, he did not try to argue it out, he was too utterly happy, too content with them all. The end of the month came and he wrote home with excuses of more reading to be got through, he could work twice as well in the sea air, was feeling wonderfully fit.

What he was actually doing his parents could not guess. It was this. Tollant and his sons had given him a partnership in their fishing boats if he would work it out. All day long he worked: in the long, still evenings he and Letty sat on the beach, talking, planning, inevitably making love.

"I've got it all worked out," he said to her one night, "I'm going to chuck everything and marry you, Letty. Everything that has happened in my life has led up to this, I can look out as clearly as I can at that stretch of water, plain clear, old girl, and see what lies ahead."

"What, Simon?" Her breath came quickly, she put a hot, fearful hand on his. Before he answered he turned it over, looking at the work-worn fingers half-curiously, rubbing them affectionately in his palm.

"There is the whole of your dearness and goodness written in your hands for those who have the sense to read it," he said. "How splendid you are, my Letty! Never be

HUON BELLE

ashamed of your rough hands," as she tried to hide them from his scrutiny, self-consciously ashamed of their coarse finger-tips and broken nails in comparison with his finely shaped hands. "I realize the wrong standard I have been brought up to respect. Why, it's free life that matters! the artificial fastidiousness that they would strap me down under would be hell to me after this. I tell you I could never bear it. I shall stay here forever if—— Will you marry me, Letty?"

He held her tight in his arms, his young, eager lips on hers, drawing the resistance from her faintly protesting heart. Common-sense told her it could not last, this exquisite, burning happiness that he had kindled in the drab room of her life: told her that she would never hold him, that she was older than he and would lose her looks early. . . . And all the time she was crying out in her inmost heart, "I can't live without him, I'd die without him now!"

"Tell me, tell me," he whispered, "tell me you will come to me."

How could she but yield to such an ardent wooing?

Somehow he made light of all the obstacles that arose, and he married her before the end of the summer; without going home first; without the colonel's consent. Consent, what did that matter when he walked on air? He showed the Tollants a typed letter, presumably from his father, signed Simon Severing, which spoke in glowing words of his marriage to their pretty daughter. How could they, simple fisherfolk, guess that Simon had composed the letter himself, that his own and his father's names and signatures were identical?

So Simon and Letty were married when he was twenty and she twenty-three; romance coloured their lack of worldly goods with the rosy shades of a perfect dawn. They were given a room in the Tollant's house and the whole family lived amicably together. They all loved Simon, one could not

HUON BELLE

help it, he was so in love with their life, so completely finished with his past; he worked hard too, and saved, so that the following year just before little Simon was born they were able to move into a tiny house with a white shell-grit path of their own. And there for ten years they lived as simply and happily as if the little Bay that held their interests and family concerns were indeed the world. A Pagan happiness, for they were outside all those troubling boundries where men pitted their wits one against another to make a livelihood, where it was the custom to wear collars and to change one's clothes in the evening! Young Simon as he grew out of babyhood, began thus very soon to weigh and compare; his father, for instance, although he wore dungarees and jerseys out in the fishing boats and slouched about the shore, always tidied up inside, while his uncles never did, nor did his mother, who grew fatter and more slovenly as the years went by until there was not much to choose between her and his comfortable Granny. When Simon the elder found the boy was quick at picking things up, he taught him to read and write, but regular schooling he had none, nor did his parents worry over it, for in those early coast days beyond the trawlers that called weekly to load with fish, they had very little communication with the outside world. Gradually too, Simon Severing sank lower, all his ambitions to write, to paint, died, he became drugged with the ease of his life, nothing apparently could rouse him to introspection, or to any sense of responsibility to his child whom he was content to sit watching for hours as he rolled about, untrammelled as a puppy on the sands.

Until one day, reading through a month-old paper that a man on one of the trawlers had given him, he came across the notice of his mother's death.

That for a moment pulled him up as if a whip had lashed out. He pointed out the notice to Letty who spelt it aloud: then

"Well," she said, "she had to die sometime. I don't see

HUON BELLE

that it affects you much, Sim." She spoke with a certain resentment, for in her mind was an irrepressible grudge against her husband's parents; not so much for her own sake as for his and young Simon's. Long ago she had found out the trick Simon had played them over that faked letter; long ago had realized that they were never going to acknowledge her as Simon's wife; all the same, when the child was born she thought in her ignorant way that they must show some pride in their grandson; but no, the letter she sent was never answered. Silence for ten years.

Simon sprawling back in his chair, bit on his empty pipe and watched Letty, wondering what his mother would have made of her had she taken her in hand and used the same process of training upon her as she had upon his sister Margaret. Margaret . . . Letty. He saw the only two women who had ever touched him closely extraordinarily clearly, the one with all the finish of a finely bred racehorse, graceful, high spirited; the other, his wife, like an ungroomed working horse pulling in the shafts with head down, trudging along with no thought beyond food and bed. An unattractive comparison. Yet Letty he knew to be faithful, indefatigable in her devotion to himself and the boy; he *knew* also she had lost all semblance of good looks, all wish to attract him as she used, and the knowledge left him cold. Where they to drift along interminably in this half-dead existence, no acute feeling except that of hunger? The enervation of the sea air made him feel as though his limbs, his brain, were filled with lead . . . even this notice of his mother's death hardly touched him, after the first shock.

Young Simon came running to the door. Hatless, barefooted, with a faded pair of knickers and shrunk shirt he looked the little ragamuffin he was: he was quick as a needle to see that something that he called a "pitch-in" was the matter. He stood a minute looking without a word from his father, biting on his empty pipe, brooding, to his mother,

HUON BELLE

who sat in her familiar attitude stooping over the fire, knees wide, face empty of expression; only just now her black brows were drawn together in a sullen frown.

"Whats up?" asked young Simon, standing in an easy hopefulness that something was at last going to happen in his tame life. Since he had been able to read for himself he had borrowed some books of adventure from the old store-keeper and had begun to make plots for escape to treasure islands and coral reefs. Simon, at ten years old, was as strong, healthy a boy as you could find, but as untrained as a young colt; Letty and her people adored him, spoilt him, gave in after two minutes of argument to whatever he demanded, he had the Severing charm, his alert eyes, of grey, so deep it was almost black, missed nothing, either his father's mental idleness or the inbred carelessness of his mother; he sided with both in turn, was as arrogant over his own power with them, as if he had reared *them*, not they him; and worst of all, he despised them both a little. Simon felt it, Letty instinctively knew that her own son would one day find out just what she was. But up to the day he came in, and demanded "What's up?" she had not worried, no one had tried to take his artless affections from her, he was her own little boy; she fed him well even though she clothed him badly.

But now, "Your Grandmother is dead," said Simon, and even as he spoke something destitute in the boy's appearance struck him; perhaps old pictures of his own ordered boyhood sprang up at thought of his mother. He roused himself to say:

"That kid is a disgrace to you, Letty. Why don't you teach him to keep himself decent?"

And the child, going over to him, put a hand on his knee and asked innocently:

"Whats decent, dad? That's rot about Granny bein' dead. I've come over from her now. She give me this dough-nut."

HUON BELLE

"Gave, Simon, gave. Good Lord, the boy's a barbarian. It's *my* mother who has died. She would have pruned you, Simon, my lad!"

"Then I'm glad she's a dead un!" He turned a handspring through the door and Letty hoped that was the end of it; she dreaded change in her lethargic indolence. But the man, once discomfited by memories, could not slip so easily back. He wrote to Colonel Severing at the old address, saying he had only just had the news, expressing sorrow, accusing himself, as he wrote, of bringing unhappiness. Not a word of Letty or of the boy did he write. But he wished it lay in his power to bring any comfort to his father now.

Then, in a week or more, came the letter that he did not show to Letty or her people. It acted upon him as a stone thrown upon a thinly ice-coated pool does; the stone shatters the smooth surface and sets the sluggish water underneath rocking. . . . But so undetermined, so incredulous did Simon still feel, that he hid the contents from them all. It was his wife's own action that brought him suddenly to a decision. One day she found the letter where he had hidden it under the box where he kept his fishhooks. She had no compunction about reading it; this was the letter, it was headed "Sweet Water, Belle Bay, Southern Tasmania.

DEAR SIMON (it began),

Your few lines of what seemed sincere sympathy have reached me here, showing me that you have not grown entirely callous as to the movements of your family. You are right, I do feel most insupportably lonely, so lonely that I am about to make you a suggestion that you will no doubt find amazing. To begin with, I have ridded myself of the house in town and have decided to live always on a farm I bought some years ago in Belle Bay; and there I propose to live out my days.

Now this is my suggestion, that you come with your family to live with me here. As far as I know you have only

HUON BELLE

the boy. Are you, Simon, giving him his chance? is he meeting with decent companionship in that God-forsaken life you have chosen to lead? what about his education, the moral training that it is only right a Severing should acquire? No matter what through your own pernicious selfishness you have brought upon yourself, no matter what your wife's inclinations are, think over my proposition sanely for the child's sake, and *give him his chance*.

I will, of course, expect you to help with the work of the farm and orchard: you don't know much about it? . . . well, neither do I. It warms my heart a little to think we may find a common interest in this venture. Now what I ask is that you think it over, talk it over with your wife, she will, I conclude, be willing to take over the house-keeping. As for the boy we will find a good school for him in town, and in holiday time he must find amusement here. One thing I stipulate, and that is that he has nothing more *whatever* to do with your wife's people. Don't think I say this from idle prejudice; I have (I tell you this openly) made all inquiries about them and they are to be cut clean out of the boy's life. Understand. Now, weigh all I have written. I shall not expect an answer from you for a couple of weeks, too much hangs on your decision for haste. Also I have much to fix up before I finally settle at Sweet Water.

Your father,

SIMON SEVERING.

Imagine if you can Letty's feeling as the meaning of the four closely written pages penetrated her unwilling mind. Simon came slouching in as she was spelling through them for the third time. His mouth set hard, and glancing up suddenly, she met a look of disgust in his eyes that hurt her far more than anger. He despised her for reading what was his private property.

"Well, you shouldn't a kept it from me," she burst out defiantly, "what made you hide it? Don't you s'pose I

HUON BELLE

take no intrust in[^] what seems to me concerns us all mighty close? When I read that . . .! Why Sim, *he*, that wicked old man, wants my little boy for keeps, can't you see what he's after, he talks a lot, but he wants on'y one thing, and that's Simon! "

CHAPTER III

THE THREADS TIGHTEN

"AND suppose," the man said, not taking his eyes from hers, "suppose I should wish him to have Simon? We don't want him to grow up always here, to grow up a savage, do we?"

"My brothers aren't savages," Letty muttered, "yet they've never been beyond the coast. They are fine and strong an' lead useful lives."

"Oh, I know all that, girl, but it's different with a Severing."

"He's half Tollant," she told him sulkily, "seems to me your folk never took intrust enough in him to care if he were black or white. Anyway, that old man's not goin' to get Simon now . . . see."

"I think you are mistaken." He avoided looking at her, but his voice had sunk a note, it vibrated with some meaning that raised Cane in her.

"I'm never mistaken when it comes to a question of what's the thing for my little boy Simon."

"Use your commonsense then, and try and realize that it's jolly good of my father to offer us all a home."

"Bah; you can't kid me. He wants you an' me to work for him cheap. Well, he can whistle down the wind for me, nor shall Boy go, but," she screamed the last words in his face, losing all control at sight of his immutability, "but *you* can go to hell if you want to, you and your fine classy family!"

HUON BELLE

Before she had finished, Simon had her wrists, clenching them, towering over her in a fury.

"You fool," he shot at her, never raising his voice, "you are jealous that some of my people have come along to claim us. Whatever happens now you have shown me what you are—a mean-minded fool, where I thought you only an idle fool."

"I'm not. I'm not!" She fell at his feet suddenly, clutching at the legs straddling over her, nearly oversetting him; her face was twisted and tortured with the strength of her emotions. The sight filled him with revulsion, something raw and sordid was here, something he could not bear to be a witness to. It brought his decision about so quickly that he found himself saying contemptuously:

"Well, do what you want to, I don't care a damn, but I am going to my father, I've been a rotten enough son to him already, I shan't turn down this offer, it's my only chance of showing him. . . . And Simon shall go with me."

Letty broke into wild sobs, crying:

"You and Simon are all I care for in the world and you know it! You've spoilt me for my own folks, I couldn't go back to them. Oh, curse the day you set foot inside our door. I oughtn'a to hev married you; Dad telled me I'd live to regret the day. And, oh man, I have! But I'll never give you up."

He looked down at her. So would a faithful dog follow his master while whining his discomfort. There had grown up in Letty the uncouth, rather dreary affections of an old dog, all the pretty puppyish ways that he had so loved had gone. Well, there it was . . . ! Taking a long breath, he shook off his intolerable disgust, and found pity in its place.

"Get up," he said quietly. "Poor Letty, get up. It's only because you can't picture any other life but this that you are afraid. In the end you will love my old man,

HUON BELLE

everyone does, he's so gentle . . . anyway, lets ask young Simon. We'll leave the final decision to him, eh? That will please you, won't it? "

Pulling her up, he made her go with him, all dishevelled as she was, to the door. There he bawled "Simon!" at the top of his voice.

The child came running from the Tollant's yard not a hundred paces away.

"Whatcher want, dad? I'm helpin' Grandpa paint the Flying Lucy. He wants me."

Simon put out a hand and held the boy still by a shock of his hair when he would have darted away. It was peculiar hair for a boy, the rich colour of medlar leaves in autumn, neither sun nor wind seemed to bleach it; a thick tumbled thatch, under which his eyes besought his father to be quick out with what he was going to say. In some bewilderment they slid along to his mother, who looked queer and snivelly, in fact, her dry sobs worried him.

"'Nother pitch-in," he reflected. "Oh, glory, what's up? "

"Well," Simon's voice had never drawled so softly, "your other grandfather happens to want you, too. He wants you and your mother and me to go and live with him."

"What . . . for keeps? "

"For keeps."

"'Course you—we'll go? "

"Then you want to go? " He loosened the hair he held, for young Simon was riveted now, and looking deep into eyes black with excitement, Simon felt his heart quicken its beat. Here was the Severing blood boiling up in his son as once it had boiled in him. What had he been about all these years to lose touch with the ferment that meant life . . .? He had drugged himself with tranquility, had drifted with the slow tide. He pressed his fingers into the boy's shoulder.

"Well? " For only the child's flaming eyes had spoken.

HUON BELLE

"Golly, I should just think I did want to go. Don't you? Doesn't mum?"

"You ask her."

He walked a few steps down the shell-grit path; the sound of his heavy boots crunching was a sound that Letty was never to forget, it printed itself on her strained senses, she felt that so were they both crushing her into the back of their minds, these two Simons of her's, that Colonel Severing with his dignity and control was drawing them after him with some piping tune that she could not now or ever hear.

She stood dispassionately looking at her son; he said urgently:

"You want to go, a *course*, mum." He took it for granted.

Oh, what was the use in fighting, they were too strong for her. It was unspeakable to think of staying without them. She said stoically, all her emotions spent:

"Yes, we're going, Simon. Your daddy thinks we've gotta go."

"Then hurrah for it," he cried, "can we go next week? Can I go and tell grandpa now? Will you write the letter straight away, dad?"

Simon came up the path again, he did not look at Letty, for the wall between them was already breast high. She was never again to refer to that scene when she fell at his feet, nor was he; yet like a blot of indelible ink, it remained spoiling their vision of one another. But young Simon, unaware, became suddenly of astounding importance to them both, they clung almost pathetically to him to bridge them over the difficult chasm that had opened at their feet. He leaned with both arms on the table while his father wrote the letter; that same letter which the colonel carried into the Kant's garden just as Ginny Gilmore was about to leave with her baby.

Already, although the old man had only come definitely to live at Sweet Water within the last fortnight, he had got into the way of carrying any bit of news over to Green

HUON BELLE

Gates, for he quickly found in his cheerful neighbour Peggy-Rose Kant, the sympathy that draws like a magnet.

"Well," he said, sitting down in a garden chair, after he had shaken hands all round, "well now, I've come with a piece of news that is going to make me take a new lease in life. My son and his family are coming to live with me here. I'm getting rid of my manager. We're going to work it. I'm done with town. Now what do you think of that?" He beamed round at them all, well pleased at the little excitement he was creating. Ginny and Peggy-Rose exchanged glances, exclaiming:

"Splendid!" hadn't they wished he had someone to live with him and his two old servants, Fanny and cook, to be company for him in that big, lonely house at Sweet Water? why there must be seventeen rooms, counting the unused kitchens downstairs; they hoped his son had a large, romping family to fill it.

The colonel shook his head. Pushing out his lips, he said, concisely:

"No. No, only one little boy, they have only the one. He's ten years old. Simon, he's called, my son tells me. I'm Simon, my son's Simon, so was my father's and his. There's always been a Simon Severing in our family for over five hundred years. I'm wondering what I'm going to make of this youngster."

"You make of him?" Peggy-Rose turned to him with the candid outspokenness that no one took offence at, it always seemed natural that she should say just what she felt, and there was only kindness behind her most intimate criticisms. "You! Why his mother won't like that, will she? I should imagine she's the one who is going to make something out of her boy."

"Hum." The colonel frowned as he rose stiffly from his chair; he stood for a moment leaning on the back of it, watching Prim crawling on all fours after Liffey, his puppy.

HUON BELLE

He turned to Ginny and said unexpectedly: "That's a beautiful child of yours. I wish I'd had Simon at that age."

"It's a charming age," Ginny answered smiling. "I can't bear to think she has to grow out of it, and be trained and corrected just as Liffey has."

"So she has, so she has," he muttered half-absently. "Still, if there's the right type of woman to do it there's nothing to worry about. But I gather my daughter-in-law is a poor stick. Not the sort of woman to bring up a Severing. Well, good evening to you—I'm keeping Mrs. Gilmore from going. By the way, would you tell your husband I'd take it very kindly if he could ride over one evening and give me some advice about manures for the hop grounds. They look to me in a bad way, and we've got to bring the place up to scratch to be ready for young Simon."

He shook hands all round, and they watched him go off down the road, holding his head and shoulders with a military preciseness, a trifle stiff in his movements, but wonderfully handsome and energetic still. Pleasurably excited over the news, the two women walked to the gate arm in arm, wondering what difference the coming of the Severings would make to the quiet group of friends in the Bay, discussing the very obvious prejudice of the colonel to his daughter-in-law, and his interest in his grandson.

"Well," Peggy-Rose said in her down-right way as she kissed Ginny at the gate. "I'm her friend, whatever happens. If it's a matter of lame dogs there's no keeping me away!" She laughed that particularly deep infectious laugh of hers, that gave one a glimpse of humour and fortitude under an ordinary plain surface: that made the old colonel say the first time he heard it: "'Thank the Lord there are still sincere women who don't tinkle; that laugh sound rings goodness."

They waited for poor Tom to come up with Prim jumping on his arm, heard him crooning to her: "There's a liddle

HUON BELLE

boy coming to play with Primmy so there is. His name is like someone's in the Bible, a precious liddle name . . . why it's Simon, the vevvy one they called Peter! he's going to love Primmy, pretty Primmy, that is Tom's liddle love, too."

CHAPTER IV

TELLS HOW AFTER SIX YEARS REPORT OF TRAGEDY
CAME TO THE BAY

“SIMON!”

“Yes, grandfather! Hulloo! Down on the river. Just coming.”

Young Simon's clear voice came ringing up through the garden of Sweet Water, over the Easter daisies and the purple asters on the terrace to where Colonel Severing stood with two letters in his hand; one opened, the other still in its thin foreign envelope with “ON ACTIVE SERVICE” stamped upon it. The hot afternoon sun of that April of 1918 slanted through the pine trees and marked half-past four on the sundial beside him; while he waited for his grandson, he traced its legend idly with the tip of his first finger: “I mark only the sunny hours.” He liked those words, just as he liked the garden and the broad band of the shining bay glinting below its orchard-bordered banks . . . all those things marked his “sunny hours” as the fine hop grounds and acres of orchard marked his working hours. . . . His was a life filled to the brim with complete satisfaction. There *had* been times, when Simon first brought his family, bad times, but in the six years between then and now things had straightened, mellowed, the boy had been a marvellous interest in the way he had developed; and then Simon, after showing a poor spirit and disappointing him for so long, had at last volunteered and gone to the War; it made him proud to think of his son in khaki shouldering his share of Briton's

HUON BELLE

sore burdens. The colonel's old eyes gazed away down the flower-decorated slope, seeing not flowers blown idly by the breeze, but a moving, victorious army: he saw in imagination his son decorated with the D.S.O., more—with a V.C. His gray eyes flamed suddenly with a spirit as young as young Simon's.

To be there!

Out from the fringe of willows below, a boat shot, rounded the curve, and was guided into the moorings at the foot of the slope. Here they had together contrived (by digging out a square and filling it with concrete) to make a good permanent landing, for twenty times a day, when Simon was home for holidays, he was in and out of the boats; he brought fellows up with him often to train, too for he was stroke now of his school crew. But in this short Easter holiday he was home alone, and the colonel was glad.

You could see as the boy tied up his boat and came up the slope of broad pathway to the terrace, with great, leaping strides, that he was the apple of the old man's eye. Just so must Colonel Severing have looked in his own distant boyhood; it was a fact that Simon had palmed off an old head-and-shoulder portrait of his grandfather as himself, and when he had made the boys at school all believe it: "Sucks for you!" he had shouted, "it was taken over fifty years ago, so it can't be me, can it? It's my grandfather! he has snow-white hair now, but he could lick the lot of you."

The living eyes, the closely folded lips above a square chin, the tawny hair, still showed that the little ragamuffin of the coast had only changed in the measure of his growth; the hair was smooth brushed now, the unusual length of leg was not ridiculous because of the ease with which he carried his broad-chested, flat-shouldered body.

"What a magnificent vigorous animal it is," the old man's half-envious thought ran: aloud he said, when a last springing jump had brought them level:

HUON BELLE

“When will you be seventeen, Simon?”

“Next Sunday. Did you bring me up to ask me that?” the boy answered grinning, hardly one breath coming unevenly after his uphill run. He thumped his chest. “In good nick, aren’t I, grand? Well, what am I wanted for. . . . Oh, I see, letters from dad. Didn’t know the post was in.”

“No, wait,” the Colonel said as he stretched out an eager hand, “Where’s your mother?”

“She’s over at Green Gates. Peggy-Rose was to give her the recipe for quince jelly, seems she must have stopped to make it! she started away soon after lunch.”

“Stopped to talk, more like. These women and their recipes! you’d think in six years she’d know how to get the hang of jelly; chattering away over there, like as not, and I can’t get a word out of her here. Well, you’ll just have to run over for her, Simon, I’m not going to wait any longer.”

“Why, what’s to prevent—oh, I see, there’s a letter for mum.”

“Of course there is, and by the post mark he’s been ordered to the front at last, to France, d’you see, mine is from England, Salisbury Plain, as all the others were. But don’t you make France of that lettering in the mark?”

Simon took the envelope turning it upside down and all ways.

“Sure enough,” he said, handing it back. “Well, I suppose he’s in all the muck and din of it now. Seems awful when here we are in peace and plenty without end. Well, with any luck I’ll be off the minute I’m eighteen.”

The colonel’s throat muscles contracted visibly, it would bring a different taste into it to think of Simon’s splendid young body exposed to that welter. He began to walk towards the house, made testy by the picture suddenly blotting out the sunshine.

“What you’ve to do now,” he ordered, “is to bring back

HUON BELLE

Letty. A tiresome woman. Never about when she's wanted." He went muttering through the stone-flagged verandah, through the great open door with its fanlight above catching the sun and throwing oblique crimson and gold patches from its old coloured glass to the polished floor. The whole house had a comfortable complacent air of repose about it, bees flew in through the open windows, drawing honey from the bowls of sweet sultans and mignonette Letty kept always freshly arranged.

"That's the one thing she does do well," her father-in-law said to himself, the flowers; she arranges them nicely, always fresh."

Lowering himself stiffly back into his particular chair in the library on the right side of the hall, he sat waiting. The dining-room door stood ajar opposite, and stretching out under the spreading shingled roof of the rambling house were a multitude of rooms, many opening one into the other; the kitchens, dairy and laundries were all under cover. Twisted stairways led both from the back and front of the house to the upstairs rooms which were built round a square landing, there the colonel kept his fishing rods; and there had collected, as time went on, Simon's sports outfits, his bats his golf clubs, his tennis racquets, all the treasured balls, boxing-gloves, sticks, that meant activity in the athletic achievements that his soul revelled in. There was a stuffed eagle in a case hanging opposite the top of the stairs, its yellow glass eyes had fixed Simon in a vicious glare the night of their arrival, when he had been sent up to bed alone. Letty had wanted to take him, but:

"No coddling in this house, he's old enough to see himself to bed, surely," Colonel Severing had told her premporily. All the same, he himself had gone out presently on pretence of getting matches, and from the hall had heard the boy say savagely, from the landing, where only the faintest light burned:

HUON BELLE

"Cats! Shoo-oo-o you beast, you're not agoin' to scare me with your yeller lantern eyes, get out, I say . . . oh, darn you, well, take *that*!" A crash of glass had followed. Simon had thrown his shoe with a straight aim!

That was his initiation with his grandfather; if he (instead of the splintered glass) had come tumbling downstairs, he could never have been forgiven him. As for poor Letty, the colonel always *had* terrified her, always would terrify her; she arrived with the fixed idea in her mind that she could do nothing right, could never suit her behaviour to the "gentry," and she never had. She was amiable, slow, good-natured and learnt in time to manage the house and two servants fairly well with endless coaching from Peggy-Rose Kant, staunch ally from first to last, but she could not get over the timidity that was a constant irritation to the colonel. Perhaps had they talked it out she might have overcome it to a certain extent, but Letty had no choice of words, she was dumb when she was frightened; as she said to Simon in their bedroom "He's an old tartar, and no mistake, Sim. He scares the life out of me proper. Can't think how I'm ever going to bear his way of clipping out orders as if he were drillin' us all."

"Oh, you'll get used to it," Simon muttered sleepily. "He's taken a great liking to the boy, that's all that matters."

Six and three-quarter years and she was still stupidly timid with him, though since Simon had been gone to the War, they had had something in common talking over the letters; but there again she was too scared to protest that she would have liked to keep her husband's letters, or at least parts of them, to herself. And now this afternoon as she hurried home with her son, after bidding Peggy-Rose a hasty good-bye and going off without the recipe, she felt the old secret indignation, but had not courage to do more than say breathlessly to Simon:

"Why couldn't he have sent my letter an' let me read it to myself?"

HUON BELLE

Without pausing in his long stride he smiled round at her as an elder brother might look at a fractious sister, he felt so much older, so—well superior—to this small woman puffing to keep up with him.

“As well to ask a dog to give up his bone to a cat,” he said, and Letty found herself thinking: “I’m getting frightened of Simon, too, he’s got his grandfather’s way, he’s going to grow just like him,” and desperately the added bitterness of Simon’s absence came to her, she had never wanted him to go, had hated him going into all that danger. Let others go and get killed, not Sim.

For she and Sim had been closer in those last weeks before he sailed with his battalion than they had been since Simon was a little lad taking his first staggering steps holding a hand of each.

In the darkness on their last night together he had woken twice to the sound of her sobs, muffled with the corner of the sheet in her mouth, for she could not bear to wake him, she cried when he pulled her over to the hollow of his shoulder, yet she couldn’t bear to sleep the last hours away.

“There are so many things you can’t bear, Let, old girl,” he whispered stroking her hair; funny how he had forgotten the feel of her hair, close, fine hair; a mouse would feel like that and be as timorous.

“Why can’t you be content to do some home job for your country,” she blurted, “and let the younger men go, you’re quite old, Sim.”

“Not so very.” He smiled wistfully into the dark; three years younger than his wife and she wouldn’t have liked him to call *her* old, “and the young men have all gone from the Bay, four of the Lichfields, two killed, poor fellows, Rebecca Worth’s nephew, and not a working family but has sent one or more of their boys.”

“Cairns Gilmore sticks to his farm, why doesn’t he go?”

“He’s got a bad heart, Letty, I know for a fact he has

HUON BELLE

tried more than once to get the doctors to pass him: besides, he is over age, older than I am."

"How she could have married that old dry-as-dust," she sniffed, "and how they ever had such a lovely child as Primmy passes me."

"He couldn't have brought himself to part from that child, he makes an idol of her. . . . Still, I know his heart has a leaking valve."

"Oh, I wish you had a bad heart," Letty wailed, "don't go and leave me, Sim—don't!"

"Hush. You know I—I'd give the world to get out of it, but look here, I can't! It's father. I can't look him in the eye. He's not said a word, but I could feel him arguing with, urging, despising me because I couldn't pluck up enough Severing spirit to enlist. But it's done now, I've got to go, but—but I'm coming back. And when I do, Let, old dear, I want to find you here to buck me up, I want to know you have stayed with father. You'll do that for me? look after father and young Simon." His voice trailed away in the darkness.

"But I don't want to. I'm feared of him, he fidgets me all the time, and he's getting Simon to grow just like him. Oh, Sim, can't I go back to my own poor dad now that Mum's dead. Oh, Sim!"

"No, Letty. No you can't," he said sitting up, and leaning his forehead on his updrawn knees. The first chill fingers of dawn were pointing through the folds of the curtained window at his haggard face before he lay down again: he felt that he would have given anything to let go and cry passionately as Letty was crying, against the horror, the gall, in his heart.

So the two who had flouted discipline and taken their own way, the easy way, eighteen years ago, found themselves caught up in the spokes of the slow-moving wheel that leaves nothing to chance, found that without spoken word

HUON BELLE

they were obeying the relentless will of the stern old man whom they both feared in varying degree, but who himself knew not the meaning of the word Fear. The shadow of the cloud only Letty could see; it had never lifted since they had waved the troop ship away from the town, never from her.

All the sunlight, all the sweet beat of Indian summer that made young Simon want to whistle and leap over every stone in the path beside her, left Letty cold; when he told her now that grand, as he always called him, was in a fine stew because she had not been there when the post came in she felt shivers go down her spine, yet at the same time the wild uncontrolled streak in her wanted to cry out: "What's it to do with him? That letter waiting is my letter. Sim wrote it to *me*!" But she was too cowed to say it even to her own son, because he was hide-bound with all the Severing traditions now: she realized he was not her "little boy" any more, he looked at things, talked of things that had no meaning for her simply because she had not the power or even wish to adapt herself. And Simon could not understand why his mother suddenly what he called "turned sulky," not answering, even when within sight of the house he cried out:

"My Heck! Here are the Gilmores come to show us their new car. Hurry, mum."

The orchards and hop grounds of Sweet Water stretched for many acres beside the main road, they ran down to the Bay, for the whole property had what is known as a river frontage, indeed, down near the packing sheds was their own jetty where steamers called to load fruit or hops on their way to town down the Huon River. The house itself stood back in a short, straight avenue of lime trees, its front door opening between French windows on either side of a gravelled sweep on to flower-beds, for it was only at the back, on the river side that the verandah ran, a solid old colonial house, its open-shuttered windows, blue-painted like its doors,

HUON BELLE

giving a look of uncounted twinkling eyes to the impressive whole.

Simon in his excitement went rushing on ahead, but Letty, slackening her pace, could see through the tunnel of gold-turning lime trees the animated group in front of the door into which Simon barged with a shout.

Cairns Gilmore stood stooping to look in the lifted bonnet of his car, Simon seized Ginny's hands and pumped them up and down in congratulation, and at that moment, Prim came through the hall dragging the colonel by the hand; she was an immense favourite with him, he loved her physical perfection, her fearlessness, and the little air she had of demanding as by right what she wanted, sometimes imperiously, sometimes (as now) coaxingly.

"Come along, midear, and see our car, it's a love, a Buick, as shiny as a looking-glass. You've got to see it before we run into your gate or somefin and scratch any of its shine off. Daddy says I'll have to wait ten years till I'm seventeen and can get my licence afore I can drive, but if I drive her in the dark with daddy's hat on who is to know?"

The picture of the small, straight figure at the steering wheel in the Stetson hat that Cairns always wore outside his own gates made the colonel laugh. He came out through the door protesting:

"But I'm busy, you monkey, letters . . ."

The air was so clear and still Letty could hear every word of their carrying voices, she became suddenly alert, full of cunning.

Letters . . . Simon's letter. Now was her chance while they were all engrossed discussing the merits of the car.

Lingering for a minute to be sure they had not seen her, knowing that Simon had not noticed in his excitement that she had not followed him, she stole through the bushes of flowering currant and mock orange that hid the path where

HUON BELLE

it branched off round the side of the house; she stooped low as she crossed the stone verandah and so sped noiselessly through the back hall into the library. There on the writing-table were the two letters, one, the one the colonel had just laid down, its sheets carefully pressed out, was addressed to himself, the other he had slit along the top with his paper-knife and was addressed to her. She knew him well enough to know he would never look at the contents without the permission from her he nevertheless never doubted.

She slipped the thin sheets from their envelope with shaking fingers and began to read almost with a feeling of guilt. Simon always wrote in a larger clearer script to her knowing her difficulty in reading; he used simple words that she would understand, so she was able to read quickly through to the third page before sound of voices made her start, her eyes were on the words, more private and affectionate than he had used in any letter before:

"So you see, dear old girl, that by sticking to your job there you are doing your bit in a way just as much as I am. You tell me you can't bear it without me, well perhaps you couldn't bear the coast without me either; everything is changed now, you have got to remember that our life there is all blotted out by the sight of this blood and horror that I'm living in. Oh, girl, we didn't realize the good life it was while we lived it, all I can picture now is the path of broken shells we made to the door; looking back it's like a clean white bullet hole in the past . . . I get queer here, Let, it's a fact that all a fellow's values get mixed; lies, truth, filth, tolerance. . . . Tell young Simon that I'll have some regular Baron Munchausen tales to tell him when (the when was here crossed out and *if* inserted) I come back. I'm in the thick of it now and when I've got *time* to wonder, I just bloody well do wonder how we are going to get out of it all; the slush alone is enough to choke you, I'd run (here *run* was crossed through) I'll come back to you if. . . ."

HUON BELLE

Letty became aware of Simon's high voice calling out down the driveway:

"*Mother.* I say, where have you got to, mother?"

They must never discover her inside; and they should never have that sheet of her letter, that precious sheet; the letter ended over the page in half a dozen hurried words as if he had been called away. She thrust the third page into her blouse, tucked it between her stays and vest where the warmth of her body made it limp so that it did not crackle, and carefully folding the other sheets she put them back into their envelope, laying it exactly how she had found it on the table. Then slipping out as stealthily as she had come in, she pushed through the bushes and came idly wandering down between the lime trees as Simon ran towards the gates.

"But mother, what have you been doing? They are all wanting to go, wondering why you don't come." There was a note of exasperation in his voice, but with a vacant smile at him she told him she didn't care, they really did not want to see her the Gilmores didn't.

"Mr. Gilmore thinks I'm a common lot," she said, wiping her red, heated face with a handkerchief she took from her sleeve, "what's the use o' always pretendin', Simon? It's you and your grandpa they come to see. Mrs. Gilmore's a kind girl, but she's under his thumb and has to act as he says, but they can't take me in with their perlitte manners. I got none, but I'm not home devil, street angel, like Cairns Gilmore is. Folks say he's changed all his ways with Primmy growing up. I'm *not* coming. You go."

She insisted on hiding behind the trees until they had gone, and Simon, disgusted and ashamed, went back to say his mother . . . well, his mother was very tired and had gone straight to her room.

They climbed into the car after that, Primula between her parents throwing kisses and calling:

"You're all to come to tea to-morrow. I've got new

HUON BELLE

bunnies to show you, Simon, and a swing under the oak tree."

When the dust they raised had died away in the road, settling like white pollen on the high hawthorn hedges that bordered it for miles, Colonel Severing turned to his grandson sternly.

"That was not true about your mother, Simon," he said. "Where is she?"

The boy pointed dumbly to where Letty came trailing along the avenue, and because of the disquieted expression on his face the old man said no more, but turned nonplussed on his heel, shrugging disdainful shoulders. There was in the gesture the keynote of the feeling he had never been able to overcome within himself towards Letty, and although he treated her always with a charming if cold courtesy, he knew no more of her than he did of the mind of a tortoise; she was still the "stranger within his gates," he did not believe she had any feelings, any mind of her own, certainly no brain or breeding, but for the boy's sake she must be *made* to keep up appearances. Still, he would let her rudeness pass this time, he was impatient to get at Simon's letter from the Front. Going without stopping through to his library, he picked up the letters in one hand and stood drumming the table absently with the other until Letty came in. Without a word then he handed her the one addressed to herself, feeling that she gave him a quick furtive look as she drew out the sheets. She ran her eyes over the familiar words, not taking in their meaning this second time, and handed them to him when she had finished. "One, two . . . four." He read out the numbered pages. "That's funny. Where's the third?"

"That's what I wondered," Letty said, biting her thumb nail. "Seems funny, I thought, he should have missed out a page. P'raps he forgot to fold it in the envelope, I thought."

"More likely they have censored it." The colonel's

HUON BELLE

eyes were running down the words, too engrossed to notice anything, but young Simon, leaning against the doorpost, saw a queer look come and go on his mother's face; was it relief? She stood there with her two hands holding one another over the breast of her blouse, breathing so lightly they hardly moved. But her eyes! "Gosh, they look queer," her son thought, "you'd think she was getting off a hiding."

Easter Sunday and Monday passed, Simon went back to boarding school at the end of his holidays and began work in earnest for his leaving examination at the close of the last term. The School Athletic Sports were over, there was only football and rowing to be thought of; what really mattered was that he must put his backbone into his books for if he was to carry out his grandfather's wishes and get into the university next year, and later, with luck, to Oxford with the Rhodes Scholarship, he would have to what he called "keep his brain skinned." Work as well as sport came easily to Simon, without being brilliant he was what, perhaps, in the long run is better, a sticker; he did not dash at a thing, he went solidly at it, seldom forgetting what he had once assimilated, and with it all there was something so alive, so artless in his enjoyment of anything that came his way that he was every bit as popular with his masters as with the boys, who made a little god of him because of his marvellous skill in sports. He was a born leader, he had only to throw back that tawny head of his and yell out the hideous school cry, and the others would follow his lead if it took them to purgatory. He was completely and absorbingly happy at school, nothing bothered him for long, because there was always some rule by which things could be worked out; but what did bother him when he let himself dwell on it was the intangible and it appeared to him unreasonable unhappiness of his mother. He knew it was not only the fact of his father being in danger at the War, no, she had changed ever since they had

HUON BELLE

left the coast; the remembrance of those slipshod days young Simon put to the back of his mind.

Winter came, a bitterly cold, wet winter. Snow lay on the hills all round the Bay, and further back the Ranges were white month after month with the deepest drifts of snow known for many years. Ski-ing parties passed through Belle Bay bound for the high plateaus where winter sports became popular with those who could afford leisure to play.

But to the Huon River orchard dwellers that winter meant long privation and hardships, days spent in the muddy fields and orchards meant sickness and rheumatism to the working people; food was scant, clothing dear, the wives at all the homesteads had their hands full trying to alleviate suffering where they could. Letty moaned the interminable dark days away; no one, not even Peggy-Rose, knew what she did with her time; she neither read nor sewed, her one pleasure—the gathering and arranging of flowers—was denied her, for the garden lay black and blighted with continual frosts, half the time fogs hung round it and the house like a thick blanket till mid-day. Colonel Severing saw her only at meal times or when the mail arrived; she watched him go every day on his rounds to the men, he gave his orders sitting, straight as an arrow, in his saddle; muffled, coated, gaitered, he rode on his horse, no man of them thought of slacking in his work even when they knew the master had gone back to his library fire and would not be out again that day: he employed no overseer as Cairns Gilmore did, for no one he said should go between him and his men tale-bearing, they respected the man who paid them good and regular wages, and knowing the colonel to be above petty deceptions, *trusted* him, which is more than could be said of the Hill Farm labourers.

The Huon Belle was almost entirely shrouded for months in spume-like mists. Early spring came with its longer daylight, and the truth of the old adage was proved: "As the days lengthen, so the cold strengthens."

HUON BELLE

In the middle of spraying-time the river at Belle Bay overflowed its banks. Heavy rains and a sudden burst of unnaturally warm weather melted the snows away up in the hills, and the river rose six feet in a night.

Pelting rain, driven by a north-east wind, sent the telegraph boy one October evening, soaked to the skin, into the Sweet Water avenue where the bare lime trees dripped ceaselessly on heaps of sodden leaves. His hand, blue with cold even through woollen gloves could hardly lift the knocker. The elderly housemaid, Fanny, who had been with the Severings fifteen years and knew all the family skeletons, opened the door keeping the knob in her hand so that she might push it to against the strong wind as soon as she had taken the telegram.

"Parson s-said to say he's fair wild he couldn't come wid ut," the boy shouted through the crack, "but he's gone to bed wid the 'flu. Bad news is in that bit o' paper." He wheeled his bicycle round and rode away down the drenched driveway.

Fanny put her hand to her grey head. Parson . . . bad news . . . then it must be Mr. Simon at that crool War. How to tell her dear master? If Mrs. Simon were worth the salt she eat she would have got her to break it . . . but as if instinct had drawn her, at the unusual sound of the knocker through the storm of wild rain, Letty came down the stairs from her room. Who could say how many times the poor creature had lived in imagination through just this scene, the telegraph boy, Fanny at the door . . . the telegram that to her fevered brain could tell of only one thing, the end of one of her Simons. "What is it, Fanny?" Her voice shook, cold and terror numbed her.

"A wire from the—from the Bay, mum, for the master."

"I'll take it into him."

"Well"—Fanny gave it her reluctantly and watched her knock and go into the library. What a squeamish woman, no spirit in her, 'twas to be hoped she wouldn't make a fuss

HUON BELLE

when it might only be one of them wires about apple shipments that were always coming. Still . . . why should parson know?

In the warm library the colonel turned from his book with a frown as Letty's shadow fell across the page. Without a word she handed the wire to him and watched him take up his paper-knife; even with fear for once knocking at his pounding heart he could not bring himself to tear an envelope, it savoured to him a loss of neatness, dignity.

The boy had carried it inside his mackintosh coat, but even so the paper stuck together.

"Oh hurry!" Letty cried, beating her hands, forgetting everything: his deliberation maddened her. Ah, but she knew, she *knew* before he said: "From the War Office" and cleared his throat. Even then the words stuck. He read it through rapidly and handed it to her in silence, then turned his back to her and the room. Walking stoop-shouldered to the window he stood watching the waters rushing and sweeping over the foot of the garden, already it had washed up to some of the terraces . . . he found himself thinking.

"Those delphinium clumps must be washed clean away, the hollyhocks are gone, half my garden's gone. . . ." and with a strange petulance, "Simon's gone! Someone's got to tell the boy."

He turned to say so to Letty and found she had taken the wire and disappeared from the room. No matter, the words were stamped on his brain, written before his eyes. He rang the bell for Fanny, she found him in his familiar attitude drumming on the table. He looked up at her when she came in with bloodshot eyes.

"Mr. Simon, Fanny," he said slowly, "has been—killed. Shot through the heart, it said; that's a lot to be thankful for. All over at once before he could know. Yes . . . well, don't cry, here, that's a good woman. Yes . . . of course one doesn't know how Mrs. Simon's going to bear it. And,

HUON BELLE

there's the boy to be told. Get the long distance line for me and I'll telephone the head master to send him home by this evening's train. I'd rather break it to him myself. Simon my only son, with a German bullet through his heart. My God!"

CHAPTER V

FLOOD TIDE

THERE is an ancient couplet, dating back to no one knows where, about the Bay floods; they came so seldom, only once every twenty years or so, that it was a wonder the inhabitants remembered it. But the year of the tragedy in the Severing family the rhyme was raked up again, for it was the worst flood, bringing more damage with it that anyone remembered.

It went like this:

“When Bay’s in flood
You’ll hear no good.”

Nothing much in the lines, but enough to make the superstitious Bay dwellers shiver when they whispered it over their fires the night following the telegram, whose bad news had been carried from mouth to mouth before dark.

Up at the big house, report went, the old man had shut himself up like a dog, hiding his wound, refusing to leave the library or eat until young Simon should arrive at ten o’clock. Triffit was sent with the dog-cart at nine to meet him. He sent Fanny with a message to Mrs. Simon’s room to say the boy would soon be here, but she came back with word the door was locked and she could get no answer.

“Best leave her to fight it out alone,” he said gruffly. “I can’t help her, Fanny . . . nor can you . . . the boy will be the one. Poor Letty. Well, well. Better not to disturb her, Fanny, she won’t want us.”

So the old man locked himself in with his own fierce grief,

HUON BELLE

showing the depth of his hurt to no one, not dreaming that Simon's wife was not of the stuff to fight out her own battle, never dreaming she would go under. He, with his back to the room, had not heard her, had not seen her, creep out of his library like a demented creature holding the telegram as if it were some nest of hornets that would sting. Going to her room she found Sim's letters, each separate one tied round with different coloured silk so that she might know, and the single sheet where he had said "*If I come back,*" tied with black. She threw them one by one on to the fire burning on the hearth, even the single sheet, kissing each before it followed to the licking flames. Then taking the key from the inside of the door, she locked it on the outside, dropping the key softly behind the case with the yellow-eyed stuffed bird. Softly, stealthily down the back stairs, with her hand on the bannisters, she stood listening intently. The servants were talking in sibilant whispers in their own sitting-room, she could guess how Simon's death—and life, would be discussed in every detail, a godsend for the gossips this dull day! and beyond, above, around her there was no sound but the hidden secret murmurs of the old house, boards creaking, wind moaning round the corners . . . all those sounds terrified her, she must get out and away from it all; away from all these people in the Bay, too, with their lives absorbed in work; she loathed the thought of it all more intolerably with the pressure of this news about Sim. If he was not coming back, of course, there was no need for her to keep her promise about staying. Simon and his grandfather would not miss her; no one would except, perhaps, Peggy-Rose, whose heart was wide as the sea itself, in its compassionate love for anyone in distress; she would have taken Letty in, but Letty wanted only one thing, her home on the coast, nothing, nobody could ease the heavy weight threatening to take the power to move from her very limbs, until she should find herself near the sea once more. Vague, disquieting

HUON BEULE

thoughts as to how she was to get there teased her as she let herself out silently through the back door; no one saw her move like a shadow across behind the barns, though a man was milking in the cowshed by lantern light, for the evening was drawing to night, darkened by the heavy clouds and driving rain. Two sheep-dogs set up a howl as she pressed herself to the wall and slipped past their kennels. . . . But nobody guessed, nobody dreamed that Letty Severing was out in the storm; losing her way in the dark; taking the turn to the river; stumbling back at last through the garden, thinking the bushes were houses, bewildered, searching, stumbling further down the slope, standing now on slippery beds, now knee-deep in water, clutching at floating debris: crying wildly at last, "Simon! Simon, oh Sim, wait just a minute by the door there, I'm comin', dear." . . . And going with open arms down to the moorings, found her feet swept from under her, laughed madly at the strength of the water; at the joy of giving up. . . . No use to fight . . . Sim had fought . . . and lost. And now, gladly, without a struggle, she was carried in strong arms, thrown up, borne downward on her way to the sea. . . . Nothing to do with anyone but Simon if she chose to go. Lights . . . darkness . . . lights again, like streets with brilliantly lighted show-windows . . . and, oh Heaven, Sim. . . .

At ten o'clock that night, after they had tried every means of getting into her room, young Simon, who had arrived chilled with forboding to take the news of his father's death in the controlled Severing way, broke open the lock. The colonel, standing behind him with a lighted lamp in his hand, peered into emptiness. A heap of white ash blew with the draught from the fireplace and settled like breath of dim spirits about the silent room, falling to dust, to nothingness. As poor Letty's love had perished, so the last of Simon's written love to her perished. . . .

HUON BELLE

All that night they searched the banks of the river, the orchards, the fields: when daylight came they dragged the Bay from Hill Farm to ten miles above Sweet Water and to the township. No sign or trace; though when the flood subsided a shoe was found a week afterwards on a beam in Angus Lichfield's barn, far below Belle Bay. But the poor battered body was carried on the flood tide far out to sea; fishermen dragging found it at last.

CHAPTER VI

YOUNG SIMON DECIDES

AND now the eyes of the people of the Bay were turned on the colonel and his grandson; they watched them, they discussed them, and as time went on they were quite frankly scandalized to find that nothing was to be changed, that Simon was to finish school and go on with the university career that had been mapped out before his parents' death. They had been quite sure the boy would want to give up everything and come to work for his grandfather. Not that it was anything to do with them! They held up hands that discouraged any accusation of interfering with their neighbour's affairs.

"Still, you would have thought that the boy would have been ready to come and settle down now to work for his grandfather after all that has been done for him and his family: the least he could have done you would have thought. Granted the colonel is not a feeble old man, indeed, for his age he is incredibly strong and vigorous . . . still, there is such a thing as gratitude from the young." So the talk ran: being strangers to the reasoning of those they discussed, strangers that is to their souls secrets. Don't you know how Kabir says: "Go where thou wilt . . . if thy soul is a stranger to thee, the whole world is unnamely."

For they were, so many of them, like the apples they grew; outwardly so attractive, inwardly so defective; not all, oh, not all; many were sound right through to the core, but

HUON BELLE

others were blighted, bitter pith, fire blight, black spot; they judged, they criticized, they refused to know their own souls, wanted nothing beyond the round of work that would bring in the shillings.

They did not *want* to realize that the world beyond the Bay was full of profound wonders, they were content to discuss the price of apples, of case material, hops, manures. Moreover, they put down Simon's decision to ingratitude. They were all wrong, for they judged by appearances alone, and with the Severings the great aim in their lives was to hide their feelings from a too curious world. Simon, like his grandfather, kept a straight back, a close mouth: what business was it of other peoples what they chose to do? Nevertheless it was when he had passed his leaving examination with credit, and was back at Sweet Water for the summer vacation before passing into the university that rumours of the feeling he had aroused against himself began to filter through to him from various sources; they brought up, too, his seeming callousness over his mother's tragic end.

The colonel found him sitting one evening on the concrete jetty dangling his legs idly over the side, an expression of unusual abstraction on his dark, handsome face.

"Well, Simon," he said, stopping beside him to stare curiously at him, "why so disgruntled? Why aren't you out rowing at this hour? Thought you were in training for the university crew. You won't get up your muscle by kicking your legs, boy."

Smarting with a sense of frustration, a longing to kick out against the pricks, he muttered: "I'm not so sure that I am going to the university. I've been taking things too much for granted. I have about decided it's my duty to stay and help you here on the farm."

"Pooh!" The colonel knocked some stones into the water with his stick and then stood leaning upon it while he looked down quizzically at Simon, "Who's been putting

HUON BELLE

you up to say that? And what the deuce has it got to do with any of the fools in this Bay, eh? ”

“ How do you know I haven’t made the decision of my own free will, grand? ” he parried. Under his thin silk shirt his heart thumped so hard he thought the keen old man above him would want to know the reason of that, too.

“ Because I’ve been watching you pretty closely since we had that bad time in the spring, my dear boy, and you know as well as I do that a Severing does not go back on his words without some very good cause. The thought never entered your head to stay (though I own it’s the easiest path and I should be rarely glad to keep you) until you came home this summer.”

“ Then you know what they are saying? ” eagerly.

“ Oh, I know perfectly well, though they won’t say out to my face. Don’t you let them unsettle you.”

“ But they’ve mucked up all my pleasure in going. I’d love to stay with you, grand. Honest Dinkum! ” He was on his feet beside his grandfather in one movement of trained muscles, he moved as easily and gracefully as a leopard, it was a delight to have him to look at, to talk to with those quick, slangy expressions of his. . . . If he went it would mean a good five years before he would come back for good: sorely tempted the colonel turned his eyes from the young, affectionate face. One word from him and Simon would stay. The difference it would make to the life at Sweet Water! Well. . . . But the boy must have his chance. . . . Hadn’t he written that years ago to his son, trying to rouse him out of the slough he had sunk into on the east coast? He could not do less than practice now what he had preached then.

A longing so intense came over him to keep the life and vivid effervescence of Simon within his house that he could have cried out:

“ Stay then, boy! Stay.”

Yet he began to walk slowly up the path to the house

HUON BELLE

leaning on his stick, knocking stones out of his way, the remains of debris left from the great flood. Simon stood battling with himself, all his plans threatened to fall like a pack of silly cards, all his hopes of carving a name that Tasmania would some day be proud to repeat; his mind was in a confusion of wreckage. He had not realized the old man could feel deeply about it and appear so unmoved; yet, watching him walk heavily up the path he guessed something of what was going on behind that set face. After all, he had had loss and tragedy enough in his life, it was only decent to stay by him now that he was old and needed help and companionship. He caught his grandfather up before he reached the top terrace where a hedge of sweet peas grew half as high as the verandah, and slipping an arm through his, he said resolutely:

"I'm not going, grand; I am staying here with you. I'll go to one of those agricultural colleges over the other side and come back to help you look after Sweet Water in a couple of years."

The colonel halted in the path and shook the arm away from his roughly; he glared at Simon from under the white pent-house of his brows . . . for just one moment some triumphant live thing glowed in his eyes as they met the sincerity in Simon's gaze . . . the boy would unaffectedly have given up everything and stayed then! The thought warmed him, but his code forbade him to show it; he said in a biting voice:

"Don't be an unmitigated fool, Simon. You've a chance of making your mark in a bigger world than this. Do you suppose for a moment I'm going to have you rub down into a country weasel? the life's all right for an old fogie like me who has been through the fire, but don't you imagine with your brains I'll give my consent to your letting these interfering babblers in the Bay influence your career. I tell you, I expect a lot of you, Simon."

HUON BELLE

"But, grand——"

"Don't argue with me, sir! I say I'll not have you stay."

He worked himself into a ferment, and as he started off again Simon saw him clutch at a garden seat and suddenly sit down fighting for breath. Not daring to offer sympathy he stood behind him waiting, saying only:

"Shall I fetch you anything, grand?"

"You can run and ask Fanny for my drops. She knows. I'm all right." He sat mopping his beaded forehead, beginning to breath more freely even before Simon was back. He drank off the tincture in the glass, and was himself again. "It's nothing, boy," he said, seeing how perturbed Simon's gaze was. "What I mean is it's not going to shorten my life. Only I'm like a child," he laughed and made a pass at Simon with his stick; so great was the relief after that awful moment of agonizing pain he could have danced, "you are not to cross me, not to thwart me, do you see? Don't run away with the idea that you are any use to me here. I'm quite capable of looking after myself and the place for years to come, even if I'm not the dashing fellow I used to be."

("And he, just now, called himself an old fogie," thought Simon dejectedly, "there's something up and I'm going to get it out of Fanny. I'm hanged if I am going to leave him if he is ill.")

But Fanny had been warned under threats of instant dismissal, not to disclose a hint, and in her devotion to her master she would have died rather. That evening, Colonel Severing went through all his carefully thought out plans with Simon. His idea was to send him to Oxford even if he failed to get the Rhodes scholarship, the orchard was paying its way and more, hops were booming; he was determined that his grandson should accomplish what his son had failed to do. Simon, to humour him, agreed to it all; but through the hot hours of the January night sleep refused to come to him.

HUON BELLE

Rising at last in desperation he dressed into a shirt and shorts and let himself out silently through a side-door.

Still, still and still as death lay the Belle, face to heaven, the clear lines of her stretching body cutting the skyline.

Moonlight flooded the Bay, the air tingled with a white radiance that filled him with a sense of aching oppression; why, in a world so utterly beautiful should death, cruelty, the shadows of evil minds obtrude their malignity? The soft swirl of the water under willow-shaded banks soothed him, willow leaves turned white, water turned to silver under the moon's magic . . . black shadows distinct as if cut out of paper, clean cut edges of trees inimitably still in the night, and that enticing rippling sound of ceaselessly running water drew him nearer. He climbed into one of the boats and pushed off, dipping his oars so noiselessly as he guided the bow into mid-stream, that hardly a ripple stirred. Silver water fell away along the sides of his boat; from his seat the world showed through a veil, the whiteness changed to powder blue, a light film of bush fire smoke made the hills swim. . . Oh, the Heaven-sent beauty of the night, why couldn't he draw calm from it? Why was it not possible to decide on one course or the other?

Picture of his grandfather in that old house alone three, four, five years . . . it was not a fair thing to leave him! Pictures of himself tied down for life to the overruling influence of Sweet Water, its crops, its harvests; being absorbed by the tyranny of the land. He groaned, he rebelled. Pictures of the old English university town, himself an outstanding figure, growing, expanding under its mellow influence. . . . His whole heart yearned unspeakably to go where he might feel if he chose his insignificance, might know the pressure of great men's intellects; the very breath of his nostrils should stir with the success or failure he made of Life. But here he would have no chance, no chance.

He drew his oars across his knees and let the boat drift on



Gum trees, graceful as silver birches, marked the track - - - -

HUON BELLE

the slow current. So intent had he been on his momentous thoughts that he had not noticed a boat creeping along towards him in the shadow of the willows, but while he rested on his oars the steady dip, dip sounded like the muffled beat of some machine, so rhythmic was it. He sat listening, drenched in moonlight: he could hear a voice singing, pitched low yet distinct:

“The deep air silvers
Arc on arc.
The bat is a loosened
Piece of the dark.”

Closer the boat drifted, and he saw the solitary singer. It was Ginny Gilmore. Mrs. Gilmore whom he had looked upon as a tame, staid kind of woman, rather a dear, of course, but not particularly attractive except when she played to him in the winter evenings, well *then* with the firelight at her back, making a halo-affair of her fair hair, she was rather jolly when she played him his favourites, Chopin's Seventeenth Prelude and the Londonderry Air. But he had never dreamt that Mrs. Gilmore could indulge so far in romance as to come singing on the Bay in the moonlight. It tickled him and made him forget why he himself was there at midnight. He took a few swift strokes, bringing his boat closer to hers; whistling very softly the plaintive Londonderry Air, he found the two boats rubbing sides under the overhanging trees before she spoke. She said simply: “Why come out of your course, Simon?”

“You don't seemed pleased to see me, or surprised.” He gave a short laugh, “and yet I believe Providence sent you my way.”

“I'm sure I don't! If you ever *hint* that you found me out here I shall gladly kill you . . . you haven't seen me; it's a dream. You understand, Simon?”

He gave a long, low whistle. “Then he, Mr. Gilmore, doesn't know? Golly, how do you manage?”

HUON BELLE

"That's easy enough," she dipped her oar impatiently up and down as if longing to be away. "We sleep soundly at Hill Farm. We snore. Now let go of my boat."

"No. I want to tell you things. I want you to tell me things. Why do you come out here without telling?"

"Because I should not be here if I did tell. And because I *must* come or die on a night like this. I stifle, I smother in that close bedroom. . . . ! No, no Simon, I haven't said that, that's in the dream, too!" and she shuddered violently, then turning to him asked rapidly:

"What do you want to tell me? Quick, I haven't long in this entrancing night."

"Shall I stay with the old man, or shall I go on with it all?" His abruptness brought a smile to her lips. Seen so in the glamour of light filtering through the leaves she made him think of himself grotesquely as Pygmalion. She had taken some enchantment from the night, leaning forward on her oars her clumsy feet were hidden, her white dress might have been of fairy make in the shimmer the moon threw over its silken folds, her eyes were mysterious and beautiful in shadow. . . . Galatea! He put his hand out suddenly and touched her, and before she could answer his first question asked another:

"Are you real Ginny Gilmore, are you?" His question throbbed with a laugh, yet before she could answer to his foolishness he was whistling again that sweet air, so softly the notes fell like fragments of trembling moonlight.

"Simon, be serious. Of course you are going, if you mean England, Oxford."

"But, Ginny (I'm going to call you that to-night, for you're not the Mrs. Gilmore I know by day), grand is ill, something beastly wrong. I ought to stay here with him. It's only decent of me to help look after the place."

"You're not going to stay," she said with passionate conviction, "not for anything on earth must you sink down

HUON BELLE

here into the life of the Bay without going through what your father planned for you. Even if the colonel was desperately sick—which I know he's not."

"Well, we'll say he's not. But even without that I feel a selfish cow—you can see how everything has changed since—oh, things happen so rottenly. I suppose it was all meant to be, but one can't understand just *why* that bullet got father in October. One more month and the War was over. Armistice, no more fighting . . . he would have come safely back . . . my mother would have been here; it's all so jolly difficult. Oh, I don't know!"

"And what you are trying to do is to decide whether that German bullet is going to be the end of your career, too?"

"That's a funny way of putting it."

"It's the way I look at it, Simon. Listen, you are extraordinarily gifted in some ways, stay here and those gifts of yours are no more in demand than a lot of fused electric wires. Try to talk about the things that interest you to most people here and it's pearls before swine. You've never been out of the country, and a prophet is without honour in his own country. But go away, get a fresh way of speaking, dressing, accent, fresh ideas from across the world, and you have it in your hands to shake them and wake them. Oh, I've seen it," she ended, with bitterness. "If it breaks your heart to go and breaks your grandfather's heart, still go. You will go, Simon?"

In the hush that comes after midnight the voice of the water seemed to rise with Ginny's voice and urge: "You will go, Simon—Simon—Simon."

He held his oar balanced above the water, letting the silvered drops gather and fall, gather and fall with a tiny trickling sound.

"I'm going to put it stupidly, then," Ginny said, impatient at his hesitation. "You must go to fulfil your Destiny. Now?"

H U O N B E L L E

"That's looming over me, too, is it?" he asked with a sudden laugh. "Well . . . I have decided, Ginny."

"Yes?" her voice was so eager he laughed again.

"Won't you be a little sorry and miss me when you are playing the Londonderry Air? Will you promise to write me letters of twenty pages? I'm going to be as homesick as a cat for the Bay."

"Bosh," she said, "you won't have time. Very well, I'll answer your letters, Simple Simon. Then you *are* going?"

"Oh, yes—I'm going."

"Then, good night to you—or good, a very good, morning." Her hand touched his on the boat's side for a moment when she went to push away; it turned and grasped her's hard, the grasp of a man.

"Thanks, Ginny," his seriousness told her what she had known dimly, that he had come out desperately oppressed just as she had, and was going back eased of his depression, "thanks; I won't forget to-night."

She pointed to the head of the Bay. "To-night . . . and the Belle," she whispered. "I bring my discontents out here and tell them to her, Simon. She never fails you. Remember. She stands for all wisdom, all tranquility . . . all peace."

The dip of oars, sound of keels singing through lap of water, of boats floating one up, one down the river, and, the Belle was left with her langour and her enchantment lying above, crowned with a fillet of moonlight; while below, the Bay, bright and smooth as a mirror, softly rocked the hidden treasure of her secrets and the river bore them out to sea.

PART III



CHAPTER I

DEBATE AT HILL FARM

DEAF BELLA was polishing the hardwood boards of the hall floor at Hill Farm with beeswax and turpentine at half-past seven on a summer's morning while the family were still at breakfast.

She leaned forward on her bended knees and rubbed with concentrated energy, her tongue in her cheek, her mouth, with its hare lip, half-open to let the jerking breaths through, for it was already very hot. Bella had a short, thick figure and no looks to speak of, and yet there were a dozen homesteads in the Bay who would have thought themselves lucky if they could have had her for at least a day a week. She had tireless energy, and a silent tongue, for she was afflicted with some impediment of speech that made it impossible for her to sound S, in fact, few besides Mrs. Gilmore, who had taken her from an orphanage sixteen years ago, could easily understand her: she came the very year Primula was born and Ginny Gilmore had trained her into what she was, a faithful and efficient maid: beside her mistress she had but two friends whom she referred to as "Cooken Fanny at Weet Water" and whom she went to see once a fortnight, all the outing she ever wished for; it was understood that conversation passed, but *how* Ginny had never been able to find out. Bella giggled a good deal and declared always she had had a "rare timb ad' the tea was 'omethin' luvelly," when she came home, but Fanny once told Prim (who in

HUON BELLE

her childhood Bella took with her often) that that great gawk of a Bella never opened her mouth but to put something in it; still she and cook were kind to her and later counted on her visits as a break in the quiet routine of the days when the colonel's was the only footstep in that undisturbed house.

No one could tell just how much those deaf ears caught, but the brain was intelligent enough; once let Bella get hold of a thing and she never forgot; she was as tenacious as a bulldog in her affections, too, adored her mistress, hated the master, though she hid it well enough for him not to notice; Prim she looked upon as her own, the flower of the Bay, the Golden Apple, still the baby of the house though she was to others a slim and lovely sixteen, just home the day before from boarding school. Bella was thinking as she rubbed the burnished boards over for the last time and carefully laid the rugs putting hidden loops over carpet tacks driven in place so that no one should slip; "Mit Prim might fall if Bella don't fasten 'em, she come dancing along like a leaf, light as feavery grasses blowin', she is, I'd not hev Mit Prim 'lip for the round world: but marter, I'd will him to fall that I would alookin' at my dear Mittus cold an' cruel like he do. I'd like him to fall an' crack he 'ead."

A bungle of half-formed sharp thoughts fermented in her brain, when the dining-room door behind her opened; she could not have heard, but some instinct, or vibration, perhaps, warned her to get up and hurry away into the back regions with her tin and polishing cloths: she knew better than to be caught in the hall by the "marter."

Primula, hanging on her father's arm came into the empty shining hall.

"O—Ooh, lovely," she said, wrinkling up her nose and sniffing, "the nice old clean smell. Oh daddy, I do love being home, I adore it, it's so—so friendly. I'm coming out round the orchards with you this morning early."

Cairns pressed the arm, thrust so confidently through his,

HUON BELLE

against his side, and used the nick-name he had given her years ago, telling Ginny he thought Primula an affectation and he wished he had not been such a fool as to allow her to be christened that. He said, looking in the blue eyes almost uncannily like his own:

"I want you to, Blue Bird, I hoped you would. I can tell you your coming home makes a world's difference to me; the place is changed; the sun's warmer."

The glance he gave his daughter was so full of love and pride that Ginny, watching them as they passed the open window, felt her heart throb in her throat. They had not asked her to go, they were content with one another, in complete sympathy, while she, try as she would, had never held Cairns attention as Prim did, never even in his short days of love and satisfaction with her after the baby's birth, looked at her with that dwelling tenderness. Primula it was who had changed, the while Ginny tried not to mind, to be proud that she had given into the world anything so perfect and precious as Prim; and for the thousandth time she put herself into the background; began upon the dull daily routine that a house demands, though she was not so old that she could watch the sunlight dancing on that golden morning without wanting to dance, too: but, she reflected, her feet were clumsy, while Prim's were narrow and light tripping, her figure was thickening as she advanced in the thirty's, while Prim's was slim and supple, and as graceful as a leopard's. With that lovely, delicately sparkling face set on a white column of neck, she was a daughter to make any father's heart swell with pride; and the straight nose, the pale blue eyes set with black fringed lashes, the firm chin and mouth were all Gilmore, not a trace of her mother, except, perhaps, in the quantity of waving hair, parted at the side, brushed till it shone like a blackbird's glossy wing, but there again her (Ginny's) hair was ash pale, Prim's dark as night.

As she helped Bella clear away, putting the cruets in the

HUON BELLE

sideboard cupboard when she had patted flat the salt in the sellers, folding napkins neatly and packing them behind the table mats in the right-hand drawer, the unused silver spoons and forks in the left, Ginny's wandering eyes followed the two swinging off down the path with a longing she had no intention of having interpreted: she turned with a start when Bella fumbled out in her expressionless way: "Youa leave all to Bella to-day, Mittus. Go make holiday wid Mit Prim. Nort but what deaf Bella cad manage hereabout." She nodded and looked clever. But Ginny, shaking her head, smiled and shouted:

"I promised Miss Prim to make her a special bean salad for lunch. You know you are no good at slicing beans, Bella."

And the woman catching only the smile and a jumble of sounds, wagged her finger, declaring in her strange jargon:

"I knew yuda leave boiled batter to Bella, I 'ead to Cooken Fanny, Mittus allus leaved boiled batter to Bella, but her like to make pie her'elf."

"Oh, you're hopeless," Ginny said in her natural voice, helping fold the table-cloth, "I suppose you think I'm talking about puddings and won't go with them because I think I make pies better than you do? Food! My life's bounded by it; it's like a moat that hasn't a bridge for me to get across to the beautiful spacious world beyond. Food is so transient, yet the preparing of it means persistent concentration. Shall I ever find the bridge that must be somewhere? every moat has a bridge . . . I thought Prim might be mine, but I can see she'd hate to be tied down to housekeeping . . . and one couldn't leave poor deaf Bella in charge." She often talked like this, giving her thoughts voice, knowing the soft cadence could not reach the woman's deadened, perforated drums; indeed, Bella unconscious of any sound had left the room.

Following the two figures, so much alike in build and

HUON BELLE

height, with her gentle, dark eyes until they had disappeared through the high blossoming privet hedge that now made a dividing line between garden and orchard, Ginny turned to her concerns without interest, whipping herself to realize there was much to be done before the great heat of the day. She took down a flat basket from a nail in her storeroom and putting on a huge gardening hat, went out to gather the butterbeans for Prim's special salad. She spoilt Prim, they all did at Hill Farm, and they all spoilt her gladly, nor did Cairns, hard as he was to every being on the place, make any effort to resist her; easiest of all could she twist him round her tiniest finger!

Tramping over the rough ground between the apple trees, too happy to let him go to serious work yet, Prim made him dawdle and stop here and there, for she had a point to work with him before the splendid day grew an hour older. She pretended concern, pausing with her hand still through his arm under the green shade of overhanging boughs.

"You haven't a very good crop, daddy. Poor dear, I'm so sorry, but I tell you what I can do to save you expense; I won't go back to school any more."

He stopped and stared at her, stopped dead.

"I've got a record crop," he told her indignantly, "a wonderful crop, Bird, I don't know what you mean. Didn't I tell you I've booked up space in every apple boat that touches here from February to April? Pooh—of course these old trees never have any crop to speak of. I only keep them to humour your mother, she used to say with her incurable sentiment that the old trees with their long snowy branches in spring made her think of—oh, I don't know! You!" Prim laughed shrilly, throwing back her head and showing perfect, small teeth.

"What a reason!" And shaking his arm she demanded suddenly:

HUON BELLE

"Where you ever fear—*fearfully* in love with mummy? The way I'm going to have men in love with me some day?"

He said awkwardly: "Oh, I suppose so." Then as if some connection had struck him he took her chin and turned her face with its mischievous blue eyes to meet his. "Don't talk this nonsense about love," he said roughly, "where did you learn such stuff? You're a silly little school-girl and back you go to school to learn sense after the holidays."

"Ah, but it's there I learn—that nonsense," she told him sadly, twisting a button on his coat. "It's much better for me *not* to go back. If you only knew . . ." she sighed.

"There are other schools." He grew black, pushed her arm away, "I'm damned if I'm going to pay £300 a year to have my daughter talk about love at sixteen."

"You've often told me mother was married at sixteen," the voice came with demure reminder.

"She hadn't—I mean she wasn't—well, anyway, you are going back to school!"

"Oh no I'm not, darling. You come and sit on this apple case with me and I'll tell you my scrumptious plan. Now. First, you don't want to lose your Bird, do you? Lose her for ever and ever?"

"Lose—how do you mean?"

"Well, I was very ill at school last term. I wouldn't let them tell you; and I shall be still more ill if you force me to go back. It makes me ill, it's full of beastly germs."

"Well——" She could see the nervous dread in his face and pressed her point. "You see, it was all right when I was in the lower school, they don't, well they don't work so hard. It's work makes you pick up germs."

"I always understood work kept them away," he said grimly. "Look here, I think we better get your mother to this debate, Blue Bird, she's got a level head and will find out if it's unhealthy."

HUON BELLE

"No, no," Prim felt herself losing ground, it would never do to get her mother in before she had his promise to her plan. "Listen, this is what I want to do, dear. I'm not coming home to slack, of *course* I'm not, it's simply that I want to do more serious work than all this sewing and literature and domestic stuff that's crammed into us. I hate anything about the house, anything fussy, I want to learn things like shorthand and book-keeping so that some day I could take a posi—I mean that I could help you keep your books, daddy," she ended brightly.

He sat looking at the ground between his knees, he had taken out his pipe and while he ranmed down the tobacco into the bowl, he scowled round at her. "And that would mean a trip up to town by train or river how often?"

"Oh, about twice a week," she said airily, "or I could have two day's lessons running (you take a course) and stay with my friend, Pam Edwards. She's going to take the college course. It only costs about £40."

"So you've got it all cut and dried," he said, looking round at her flushed cheeks, thinking privately, "she's clever as paint; fancy thinking all that out!"

And Prim felt her heart bound; she could read him like a book, the victory was virtually hers: no more crabby governesses, no more beastly home lessons; freedom, town with Pam for two days a week! Perhaps they would let her take dressmaking or something. That would mean three! But she must not appear too jubilant, she said thoughtfully:

"Of course, daddy, it is pretty hard work, but I would simply put my back into it, always thinking how I could help you here, and it's not so very far to town, not nearly as far as to boarding school."

That last view of it won Cairns. He hated her being so far away, after all, plenty of girls left school at seventeen, and she would be that in March, only two months off; let her think she was going to be useful to him, let her be *with* him

HUON BELLE

and he didn't care what her mother said about it all. He put his arm round her shoulder and squeezed her.

"Very well, that's settled," he said; she made him take his horrid pipe out while she kissed him fervently, then relighting it for him she walked with him as far as the apple sheds where the busy hammering of the case-makers made the air vibrate. "You've won the debate then, Bird! Coming in?"

"You are the dearest daddy in the world, Cairns Gilmore, my dear; millions of tons of my love! No, I'm not coming in, they are making too much din, I'm going to lie in the hammock and think. What? Oh, no, I'll leave you to tell mother, besides, Becky Worth is with her in the vegetable garden and Becky is more than I can bear, she gobbles when she talks, gobbles and overflows; her talk-glands want shutting up!"

"Her tongue wants tying," Cairns grumbled. "She comes here with begging tales to your mother about the poverty in the Bay . . . laziness and incompetence *I* call it, and she brings those everlasting crochet what-you-may-callums to sell to help the afflicted, and your mother is fool enough to give her absurd prices for the useless things. I bet anything Mrs. Worth takes away pounds in her purse. How d'you know she's here, Bird?"

"Saw her go past the garden hedge just now with a parcel."

"What did I tell you? You watch, there will be no parcel when she goes back, but her purse will be heavier."

"Well, so long as it's mum's money, not yours, what does it matter?" Prim said tolerantly. "I suppose it *is* her money she gives away."

"Oh, yes, it's the interest on some money old Dr. McHyde left her, she has some deluded fancy that he would like to think it helped the Bay folk. I suppose if she cares to get rid of it that way——"

"I wouldn't," Prim broke in smartly. "When I've

HUON BELLE

money of my own—when I earn it I mean, I shall see that I get every penny's worth, and I'm going to earn a little fortune, you'll see!"

"You will never be forced to do that, Blue Bird."

"Needn't I? Are you so rich, daddy?" she wheedled.

But Cairns suddenly buttoned up, he was not going to let anyone suspect how solidly his wealth had mounted, not even his own family, he said: "Never you mind what I am, I've got nothing to fling about I can tell you. Now you better run and tell your mother I want lunch at twelve o'clock instead of half-past. It slipped my memory with all this talk, I've to go in at one o'clock to the township on business."

"Hurrah, I'll come with you!" He watched her dart away, thinking, "Funny, when she said not an hour ago she adored being home, and here she's ready to seize every opportunity of getting away! jumpy things, girls, restless things . . . but Bird's all there, she's clever as paint."

And she was clever, too clever to risk going with the message to her mother who would keep her to do something in the house for certain, and Prim had not the slightest intention of tidying her room or making her bed . . . she had hidden an exciting book, *Love's Liberty*, under the red cushions in the hammock: so she avoided the gap in the privet hedge where she could be seen from the vegetable garden (for there Becky and her mother were talking), and stooping low under the apple trees, she ran round through the chicken yards into the kitchen. There she wrote on Bella's slate, "Lunch is to be at 12 instead of half-past," and putting it in the middle of the table where it must catch her mother's eye (for she could hear Bella churning in the dairy), ran out and was hidden for the whole of that unclouded morning in the hammock, nor answered to Ginny's calls of "Primula! Prim dear, come and show Becky how you've grown; she's going."

HUON BELLE

"Let her go!" the girl thought, snuggling deeper in the cushions. She watched with a speculative eye the two women presently passing along the pink-bordered path to the gate. Would she ever walk heavily like that? would her clothes ride up at the back giving the look of a badly arranged, shabbily turned out pair of—dumplings! Prim twisted her graceful slim body into a more comfortable position and turned a page, half-petulantly reading . . . "and as the years went by Clarabelle grew more and more like her mother, as girls so constantly do. . . ." Bother Mothers!

"Well, I'm afraid I must not stay to see her to-day, I've promised to hurry back to Zarepath so that poor Hanks can get his lotion when he comes," Rebecca Worth's strong, masculine voice was unruffled although she had seen what Ginny had not, a slippered foot hanging motionless over the side of the hammock under the distant copper beeches, "It's of no consequence when I see *her*. I'm much more interested in the thought of seeing Simon. You know the colonel has had the letter at last saying he may expect him in the new year?"

"Oh yes," Ginny swung the basket of beans in her hand, nodding swiftly, becoming of a sudden beautifully kind to the hard-featured woman beside her, "the dear old man brought his letter to show me, though Simon had already written to tell me. You know, Becky dear, he has been wanting to come back for the last two years, but the position he had offered to him after he left Oxford was so good and such excellent training that his grandfather would not let him refuse it."

"What, journalism?" Mrs. Worth's voice was sarcastic, she unlatched the gate and stood swinging it on its hinges.

"And lecturing in different parts of England; he went even to America to deliver a course of lectures."

"Don't see that it was much training for his life out here on a general farm, not much help towards apple and hop

HUON BELLE

growing. I thought the same when Simon won his Rhodes scholarship and you were all so cock-a-hoop: I look upon all this scholarship business as a terrible mistake on the part of that benighted dreamer, Cecil Rhodes, I think half the young men that go are completely spoiled for after life, that's why I am so keen to meet our young friend Simon again." Rebecca was off on one of her pet hobbies, she was illustrating what Prim meant when she said "she gobbles and overflows," few people of her own class except Ginny and Peggy-Rose Kant had patience with her, but they two pitied this lonely, able woman who had long ago lost her husband and only son in a cruel shooting accident after but four years of contented married life. She had carried on at Zarepath ever since, even, when in bad years she could not afford top pay for labour, ploughing and spraying and pruning herself. But under a dictatorial, unyielding manner was hidden a heart of gold; she knew every poor home in the Bay, help was freely given, not blindly, but with discrimination.

So Ginny Gilmore contradicted her quietly with:

"Cecil Rhodes made no mistake, Becky. It's the most wonderful opportunity ever given to the young men of the Colonies, but—and here is where the blame must never be put anywhere but on their own shoulders—they must take their immense advantages in the right spirit, they must reciprocate."

"H-hum. I agree with you there. I don't doubt Simon has. He's got more than a normal sense of the obligations he owes: also he is more brilliant than the usual run of country-bred boys, but that brings me back to my point——"

"Now to stress *my* point," Ginny broke in, "I'm going to show you a precious cutting Simon sent me last mail. Here it is in my pocket, I like to take it out and read it over: but this is just the part I'm going to read to you."

"Do," Mrs. Worth said twisting her lips to hide a you're-

HUON BELLE

not-going-to-convince-me smile, "I've left my glasses at home."

Ginny laughed outright, "You are an awful woman, Rebecca Worth, you're just persuading yourself that no opinion's any good but your own! Now listen what that sober man Sir James Barrie says in this speech to last year's Scholars, it rings clear and true as a bell and it's from his heart you may be sure, the heart of a true genius because he loves the homely things. . . .

" ' Yet the beginning of all you are to be already lies inside you: a little speck that is to grow while you sleep, while you are awake, and in the fulness of time, according to your control of it, is to be the making of you, or to destroy you. . . . I suppose most of you are now going home-along, as Mr. Hardy's rustics say. I believe you will find in the end, perhaps be surprised to find, that your sojourn here has not made you know England and Europe better so much as made you know your own homelands better. Do not forget *Oxford* and the clashings with us and foreign nationalities, on which Mr. Rhodes set such store " (Ginny repeated with emphasis, "on which Mr. Rhodes set such store ") "Oxford, where you once sat out a dance with the evening star." Well—that's all." She folded the slip of printed paper, put it in an envelope and back in her pocket. "Go and digest that, my dear; all that applies to Simon. And Heavens, half the morning's gone with me gossiping here. Oh, go, go, I can't listen! What? "

"All I said was," Becky Worth shouted after her as she hurried up the path, "all I wanted to tell you is, if you can bring your thoughts down from the skies, that your girl is lying—in *the* hammock, yes, *hammock*. Make her go and help you in the *house*. . . . What? Holidays? Be bothered, when do you have a holiday? You and Cairns are going fair to ruin that girl, I'd make her come into the house and do her share, you spoil her."

HUON BELLE

"There are some things you can't spoil—like you, Rebecca! Oh, don't make me talk any more. . . . I've a million things to do."

"Just one more," Mrs. Worth beckoned her back imperiously, "I very nearly forgot this cutting I brought for *you*, taken from a Melbourne paper. Keep it, it's no use to me, I haven't any girls, thank God, and if I had they wouldn't be modern." She stalked half-way back up the path, handed Ginny a strip of print, and went off banging the gate.

Looking down, Ginny's amused eyes caught the heading: "The Modern Girl." She skimmed through it as she moved quickly to the house, there was nothing in it to absorb her till she read the lines: "The modern girl is very free. . . . If she has no guiding principle she is apt to be wrecked on the sea of material things." And above that again: "The girl who knows what she wants is something of a rarity."

"Yes, yes, yes and so on," Ginny thought, folding it, "written by a spinster, I see, they can all talk a lot, but when it comes to coping with the entire *complacency* of girls like my Prim? Who is going to prove that she has not as much right to her way of looking at her rights as I have? Why after all *should* she become what I am, tied to a man's house," and looking round as if her thoughts could float away out to Cairns, "it's not that I'm not h-happy. I am. I am."

Later when the early dinner was over, Ginny watched her husband and daughter drive off together in the big American Oakland, a new car Cairns had lately bought, particularly suitable for Tasmanian roads. Prim was at the wheel, for though she was not quite old enough to get her driving licence she drove perfectly, with her father beside her to drive if they should meet anyone who would be likely to, as she put it, "pop on her."

Cairns was looking fagged out already with the heat; he still kept on with the orchard round, though he could have

HUON BELLE

well afforded to take things easy; his hair was almost white, his eyes sunken in a face that had an unhealthy grey shadow round the tight-lipped mouth. He had hardly touched a mouthful of dinner, not even the delicious butterbean salad of which Prim took large helpings: it worried Ginny, yet when she urged him to go and rest before going to the township, he pushed his plate away and told her impatiently that he was fed up with her fussing and glad to get out of the house.

Prim had laughed and said, throwing down her napkin and springing up:

"You won't catch me fussing over *my* husband! Come on, dad. Don't you worry, you are looking just splendid, to me. If you're going to think he's ill, mother, he naturally will be. You're going to let your Bird drive you, aren't you, dear?"

After that the sound of the car dying away down the road. And they had not even bothered to say good-bye to her.

She went slowly into the bedroom wondering what they found so engrossing in one another that could not be confided to her. Oh, she was *used* to it. At the bottom of her heart she knew why Cairns never made a companion of her. Though he did not by word refer to those bundles of letters burnt so long ago, before Prim came to take and keep all his cramped affections, Ginny knew he *never forgot*, never would forget or forgive.

But she told herself, as she went aimlessly that hot afternoon from room to room seeking the coolest, that she had more compensations than most women. She adored her home: the thick-walled, low-ceilinged rooms were now full of charm. By degrees they had refurnished and remodelled practically the whole house: Prim's bedroom and her "snuggery" opening from it were girlish and fresh with their white furnishings and blue hangings: her own, which had been old Mrs. Gilmore's room, was much the same as when she married, for Cairns would not have his mother's belongings,

HUON BELLE

curiously enough, moved: so Ginny went to sleep every night in the bed where the old lady had lain so long in that living death.

But the sitting-room had been cream washed, and there the misty lemon cretonnes and the dark cedar fittings gave Ginny repeated pleasure: she kept it flower filled and dainty, and for hours when she was alone in the house, would sit at the piano practising with concentrated seriousness, or letting her hands wander dreamily over the keys: she was the acknowledged musician of the Bay now, for poor Tom Kant, who had taught her so faithfully and with such pleasure had grown into helpless imbecility with the years and never left Green Gates, and Peggy-Rose never left him. Anyway, Prim turned up her pretty nose at the Kants.

Sitting down at last on the piano stool she let her mind wander off in dreams of Simon Severing: and as so often happened, her hands, almost without consciousness, found the notes of the Londonderry Air . . .

In imagination there was Simon lying back in a chair, one leg thrown over the arm as he had so often thrown it, whistling a soft accompaniment, while she sang:

But come ye back when summer's in the meadow,
Or when the valley's hushed and white with snow,
And I'll be here in sunshine or in shadow.
Oh, Danny Boy, I love you, love you so. . . .

CHAPTER II

LETTERS FROM SIMON

FROM the first year to the last of his settled life at the English University, on Simon Severing's wall above his study table at Oxford there had always hung a calendar for the year; not a tear-off calendar, but one of the kind that has the whole month's dates set out in black letters; the kind that shows at a glance where one stands, what events are looming over the day's horizon. And these yearly calendars Simon marked week by week with the Tasmanian mail day, in—out. It had grown into an insensible habit, a habit that in the privacy of his own mind he prized for the simple reason that it kept him curiously from becoming too haunted by his homesickness . . . he knew by cabalistic marks just when he would certainly get a letter from grand, when from G.G. (Ginny). Those two were his regular correspondents, the other dates marked meant that he must write to various other individuals, and were jotted down as Miscel. Why, by what logic, the calendars brought his home nearer he could not have told you, and neither chaff nor generous pumping would bring out any explanation for the curious.

Men strolling into his study on the first of a month to look over his shoulder to see what he was at, would point a pipe stem and ask:

"What the deuce are you reckoning out, Severs? Not the lecture chart, is it, you ass?"

A grunted "No."

HUON BELLE

“Then look here, who’s ‘*MisCel*’? Your spelling’s rotten, dear chap, there are two s’s to miss. . . . And G.G.? Is it fair, I ask you, that she should have more attention than Miss Cel? *She* comes every bloomin’ week, it’s not nice of you, Severs!”

No answer whatever from Simon, but a stealthy feeling under the table with his foot for a cushion he kept there for emergencies.

“Grand,” went on his tormentor dreamily, “of course short for grandmother. Always keep in with the grand-mothers, dearie, you make a sweetie-tweetie, white haired—oh crickey, Severs, *not* below the be-e-elt! Oh, my stars where d’you raise the cushion; give me somethin’ some of you to kill the blighter!”

A tremendous rag would follow, Simon in the midst hitting right and left with his bursting cushion; explosive. vengeful cries, wild yells for quarter, boisterous laughter . . . and sudden calm. Demands for supper, smoko, and in half an hour they would all be seated, sprawling, some on the big sofa, some on the floor, always three in the one easy chair with its wide arms, talking, arguing, discussing far into the night; Simon with his strange hair standing like flames where his hand ran violently through it, his face alight with the stimulation of this brushing against minds as vigorous as his own, minds fermenting with new thoughts, new excitements; minds of quicksilver. He attracted the deep thinkers to his study, there was no room for slackers, the very atmosphere held a quivering energy as Simon gave forth his views . . . and then, in the small hours after they had all left him, singing as they went some inappropriate jingle such as:

Still, I’ve met the young lady in white,
And I wish we had met a bit more.
I shall go to bed early to-night—
Oh, gosh! it’s a quarter to four!

HUON BELLE

Simon would roll into bed and sleep sound as a hedgehog rolled in a hedge, until at dawn he awoke with his brain clear and alive with ideas, and pulling a pad towards him, he would switch on the electric lamp he had contrived above his head-rail and write a letter swiftly, sometimes in such a splutter to send his poignant thoughts, to Virginia, that she found the lines hard to decipher. But she kept them all, every one from the time he landed in England, for to her they read as a marvellous book of the development and gradual unfolding of a fine man's character.

As the years went on he wrote with the same regularity and fire, but now her image had dimmed and he wrote to his ideal woman; not as a lover, never as that, but as a man perfecting that most perfect of human relationships, the friendship, untouched by passion, of man and woman. Distance, interest in environment, deep-thinking natures on both sides made this possible . . . and what could Virginia, soul-starved in the exceptional isolation of her married life, do but respond with enthusiasm to his constant appeals to "Write a chap letters that stimulate every nerve in his body to carry on with the very best that's in him: that's the kind of letters you write, Ginny Gilmore. They make me tingle."

So a pact grew up between them, cemented by the years, hidden from the world by the sensitiveness of both writers; had anyone prodded curiously, artfully, into those letters they might have found much to hold up to ridicule, seeing only absurdity or food for intrigue, in a correspondence between a youth and a married woman; but on both sides they were held sacred.

And those letters carried little of Ginny's home concerns to him or of local news in the Bay . . . he wrote her from the beginning, "tell me of Belle Bay *things*, not of Belle Bay people; grand, in his fortnightly budgets, sends me every bit of gossip he can scrape together, I know how many bushels of pears, how many of apples every orchard ships away; he's

HUON BELLE

as accurate as a machine! He tells me of everyone's health, too; and the *scandals* he ferrets out about you all! But from you I want pen pictures of my 'hills of Home.' "

Once when he had been gone three years, she wrote: "Prim is growing more lovely than you can imagine as she advances in her 'teens, Simon. Her eyes are pale china blue and with hair so dark they give her an almost too striking beauty for this quiet Bay, already people stop to watch her if she comes suddenly into a room, her skin is smooth, with that brilliance of colouring that arrests and holds the eye of an artist, and she is so completely mistress of herself, able to control the spirits that are always ready to bubble over. . . . Your grandfather admires her intensely, I can see."

To which he replied: "I know he does, why not? He is old, and youth, vivacious lost youth with its beauty of soft skin and graceful curves, stirs his old blood still. But I, call me prig if you like, care far more intensely for the loveliness of a woman's mind than for her loveliness of body. I've met some glorious looking girls over here, and often I've thought I would see how far their intellect went; but bah! one throws in a line, as it were, and hooks nothing but empty shellfish . . . or they are like cream puffs with the cream scooped out. Give me rather a matured, sweet, reasoning mind—shall we say like—yours, Virginia? "

Again, towards the end of his three years at Oxford, she wrote him that the colonel was most marvellously well, had lost all symptoms of that acute pain that had troubled him, under some new treatment; was happily content to make his rounds with old Liffey's more sprightly son, Tatters, a most companionable little dog who never left him now that poor Liffey had had to be "put away." And he answered her letter the day the mail brought it to his dismantled study, where he was packing his books and all belongings for his move to London. He wrote, "I am thoroughly glad to

HUON BELLE

hear the news from you about grand, his own letters always pooh-pooh any question of my returning on account of his health, still, one can't tell how much is his confounded unselfishness; if there ever was a man to be admired and revered it's grand; look what he has done for me? Just think what I should have been, and where, if he had not insisted that we should leave the coast and that I be sent to a decent school. Life all through hangs on such slender threads, one is ready to swing here, swing there, or just to root below ground, throwing out no leaves. . . . I daresay I should have been still at Sweet Water following the seasons round with a picking bag and pruning knives or spray-pumps if you had not drifted out from under the willows that moonlight night. Strange magnet that the moon is, she saw to it that we both felt her influence, saw to it, too, that under her spell, the wall of reserve between us crumbled, as I believe it had never crumbled to any human being for you any more than for me . . . and now your mind is the book I love best to probe into in the world, you can never close its pages from me, I can never go floundering along again, trying to get away from my real self, because I was half-ashamed of feeling so deeply about the things that only a good woman's intuition tells her exist below all that is latent and undeveloped in such as I was. My talk that night with you in the boats, Ginny, changed the whole current of my life, changed my whole conception of women, made me realize that each person born into this world is a law unto himself. I must travel abroad to prove myself to myself, France, Switzerland, Italy—above all Italy. I must see things from the foreign standpoint. Languages come easily to me. . . . As you, in your wisdom, guessed I was ready to go right under after the double awful tragedy of my mother's death following on my father's . . . who could tell (and public opinion turned all one way, I could see) that she did not take her own life, because my grandfather and I were giving her little love or

HUON BELLE

sympathy? I don't know, no one will ever know, what her object was in straying down to the river that treacherous night, I never did understand her, or love her as much as I should have; so many ways she had of looking at things grated upon me. Poor mother—and yet in me lies hidden the seeds of her own undisciplined nature: it wars with the Severing pride of race, it makes me feel I am neither flesh fish, or fowl, or good red-herring: you alone, of women, will know what I mean. . . . (Ah, thought Ginny as she read that letter, “do I not know in me the warring!”) “and for this reason I am determined to stay this side of the world as long as I am possibly able, I mean as long as grand can reasonably do without me. Imagine, then, what a relief it was to get your letter to-day saying he is so fit and content for me to stay, just when I am in the act of packing to take up journalism in London; and along with that I have some tutoring for the Long Vac., also some courses of lectures to deliver: all grist to the mill, and above all, varied experience, for to tell you the honest truth, I am not ready to face the Bay criticism yet, not master of myself quite or of my prejudices; Oxford leaves one feeling there is no top to the world, that one must soar and outsoar . . . whereas if I remember the atmosphere of the Bay accurately, the world is all bottom to most of its population, all a groping and grubbing for daily bread—no that's not quite fair either; there's you, there's Peggy-Rose Kant, who are ready to crane your necks to look for the stars! But I must be sure of myself before I come among you all, I'm still undecided about many things, what to do with myself outside farming, for instance, that can't satisfy a man's appetite for things apart from the material, can it? Another thing, I want to get among absolute strangers for a bit. I made oceans of friends at Oxford, damn good pals, men, many of them who will step into their fathers' shoes and find life all cut and dried; it's

HUON BELLE

different for me. . . . I've got to strike *out*, and it's easiest to learn the first strokes among strangers; even my home folk might laugh, so I'm of a mind to stay three or four years longer, for once I come back to grand at Sweet Water, I've no intention of leaving him again."

Relief so unexpected that it left her dazed swept through Ginny when she read he was not coming: she *did not want him to come*, she was jealous for his letters, for the enchantment that distance lent her in his young eyes. There came many letters after that, the postmarks varied for they were slipped into pillar-boxes in many English country towns; many towns, too, abroad and in America, where he was sent to give the lectures entitled "Art and Commonsense," that were gradually bringing him into prominence. Then in following years, when he enlarged on his theme, he called his next course "Unconscious Militants." . . . He began his lectures something in this strain: "Useless for men and women to be always fighting, useless and stupid, yet they are fighting against imaginary forces half their lives. Go, my imbeciles, let yourselves go, float with the tide, don't battle against it, it wears you out before your time. I want you to realize this; eat it, take what you are chewing here away and digest it . . . that until men, and shall I say, especially women? look upon legitimate work with *pleasure*, as something to be proud and thankful for, there will be no joy in life, no true health . . . why health and *sanity* are wrapped up in work perfectly, moderately done! One hears so often, 'Yes, poor thing, she has quite broken down, works *too* hard, of course.' Bosh to that 'of course.' No one works too hard if they work with the restraint of deep interest; no good going like a bull at a bush and then lying down to pant, no use wailing to oneself all the time: 'Oh, I know I'm overworking myself, I'm going to be ill.' Be ill then, get a basin! but don't let your mind militate against your body . . . it becomes a pernicious habit!"

HUON BELLE

Things like that Simon told them in his lectures: he told how to raise the *standard* of work. . . .

He sent cuttings to Ginny, but it was not the same thing as it was to watch young Simon on the lecture platform, to follow unconsciously telling gestures, to be drawn by the charm of his manner (gift from his father) by his young dignity and earnestness, and above all, by the magnetism of his voice, low-pitched, clear, vibrating: one mannerism he had that very soon became noted, a quick intake of breath at the end of his sentences: it gave the impression of eager impatience to get on to his next point, of boundless enthusiasm, otherwise he spoke with distinguished deliberation. His success was enormous, the papers of two continents hailed him as a rising sun, not scorching in brilliancy, but warming with the steady glow of his sane teaching. . . . Yet with it all, Simon remained almost wistfully insensible to the devotion he was able to create in his hearers; he would look down at some vast audience seeing the white sea of upturned faces as a massed humanity, not as individual people. He felt himself profoundly uplifted by their breathless attention, but again in the mass not as warm human beings.

During his fourth year of lecturing he wrote to Ginny: "I find myself sitting outside myself, if you can understand such an involved description of a very queer sensation, Virginia! just looking on: feeling that my true self, my vital self, is back at the Bay, leaning over the stilled oars in my boat to watch the lights and shadows moving generously over the hills, great blocks of shadow from the sailing clouds, shifting silently as if pushed by invisible giant hands . . . swinging over from Sweet Water to Hill Farm, with the hawthorn white on the hedges and the orchards thick with blossoms, like nothing but heaven on earth. . . . Look here, Ginny, I'm going to chuck everything and come back. It's the time. I stand and ask myself 'What are all these people to me compared to grand and—you?' I came across

HUON BELLE

a thing of Kipling's the other day called "The Stranger"; if that great man had seen behind the doors of my mind (though I keep them under lock and key!) he could not have got my sensations better; it goes like this. . . .

The Stranger within my gate
He may be true and kind
But he does not talk my talk
I cannot feel his mind.
I see the face and the eyes and the mouth
But not the soul behind.

And another verse goes:

The men of my own stock
Bitter bad they may be
But at least they hear the things I hear
And see the things I see
And whatever I think of them and their likes
They think the likes of me.

But perhaps best of all, Ginny, go the lines:

But they tell the lies I wanted to
They are used to the lies I tell. . . .

Can't you see how every cursed thing you do here in England stands for or against? They weigh you, they hedge you in with the barbed wire of their traditions. Again I'm telling you I have made a host of friends this side of the globe, but I don't delude myself into thinking they are going to miss me long when I come out for good. There are nights in summer when the craving for Sweet Water rises like a live thing in me . . . there is nothing I have ever found to equal the English gentle-people with their rooted dignity and hospitality, times I've felt if I sweated for a thousand years I could never come into a room just as they do, I admire'em, but their finish makes me want to break out! I am sick, homesick, heartsick, for the freedom of the

HUON BELLE

Colonial life: and I don't (as you insinuate) want to marry one of their girls. . . . No, Ginny, it's time for me to come home, home, *home*. I've found out what I wanted to about myself. One thing only I ask of you, be vague about my actual coming . . . my throat swells and I have to gulp when I think of the date I've fixed; and the date that steamer is due in town; but only you and Grand are to know it. I'm not going to have Belle Bay turn out with a blare of trumpets as it were; I'm going to drive myself quietly along out to the Bay in the Morris Oxford I'm bringing out with me; and suddenly I shall be among you all again.

Long after, he had left Oxford and was on his lecturing tours, there came one letter from Simon that Ginny burnt; for reasons only open to herself, her heart beat to suffocation as she read the news of that letter and interpreted it. . . . It ran:

VIRGINIA DEAR,

I have had rather a curious experience that I know will be of interest to you from the point of view that there is no place as small as the world. You must tell me if you can comb your memory and find in it anything that may lead to the discovery of certain traces: write me in your answering letter to this, in which I am sending you the address in case in the course of my travels I lose it (but to this Ginny replied that her memory was blank: she would, however keep the slip of paper with the address . . . how otherwise her beating heart asked, could she answer?) Well, as I told you a lecturing tour in Scotland was arranged for me. I gave my first lecture in Glasgow last night to a crowded audience. I think I have told you that when I look down from the platform the sea of faces means nothing to me once I am off on my theme, but some rare times a face will disengage itself in the queerest way and I find myself talking to that face alone, generally there is some expression

HUON BELLE

of particular listening intelligence, or some sympathy that carries through to me. Last night I found myself quite unconsciously directing all my talk to an old man in the second row, a very old, fine face with a singularly sad yet interested expression: he looked Scotch to the backbone, a very upright soldierly man for all his age and white hairs . . . but it was his eyes that were so remarkable, they haunted me: when I saw them closer (for after the lecture he came up to the platform and had himself introduced to me) there was something so familiar about them that it bothers the life out of me to think *whose* eyes I know so well, eyes of a gentle and noticeable dark blue, set rather wide. . . . Well, it's no use, I can't catch hold of memory and demand, still *isn't* it the limit when a thing like that eludes you . . . if only I could connect, I believe I could get on the scent of the old Laird's trouble. For sore trouble he is in as he told me, for he insisted that I must go and stay a few days with him at his castle in the Highlands up near Bridge of Allen . . . there was no getting out of it. He is The Cameron, head of his clan, and used to implicit obedience. Well, the first evening as soon as all the paraphernalia of dinner was over—he lives like a king all alone in that great place which is to pass on to his brother's son when he dies—bagpipes playing him through meals served with ceremony such as we never dream of in our free life out there—well, as soon as we had got rid of the pipers, he began to tell me the reason for coming all the way to Glasgow to meet me. He heard that a man from Tasmania was to lecture, so (this is the core of my story), he determined to risk the chance of my knowing: but I couldn't help him, perhaps you, having lived longer in that part of the world, will help. Do try . . . it appears thirty and more years ago The Cameron had an only daughter, and only living child, called Elspeth, who got herself into trouble with a worthless artist who came to paint the carved stone gates, famous gates, at the Castle. He made off one

HUON BELLE

night and was no more heard of; and she, poor girl, after a week, entirely disappeared too. *Years* afterwards he found she had immigrated to Tasmania, had there married and had her child: then just as he thought he would recover her, he lost all trace of the whole bunch of them through some accident, all vague to him. The only piece of authentic information he could get hold of was from a man called Todd, at the Mill Settlement, who sent word through the postal authorities that he didn't believe the little girl had been lost after all in the bush as everyone said; but that was sixteen years ago: and the next thing was he got word the man Todd had died. And yet, in spite of such endless disappointment, that grand old chap still holds on to the belief that his granddaughter lives, and that some day he is going to get word of her. Perfectly wonderful to hear him talk, as if years stood still: as they seem to in this high, wild country. Well, help me all you can by jogging your memory, Ginny. . . . Now about those books I promised to send: I knew you'll love the *Thoreau*."

But all the time as her eyes scanned the rest of his letter, her mind was back in the past. Why had she burnt those letters with their evidence? There was nothing left but the yellowed handkerchief that had wrapped the china dog, marked in one corner in fading ink "Elspeth Cameron." Yet, even with that how could she break through the silence Cairns had bound her with? She sat crushing the letter, gazing with the dark blue Cameron eyes out into the peaceful surroundings that had so dearly grown to mean home. She viewed, as in a mirror, the pictures of her life; there swam into the glass reflections of her mother, always working, black-frowning face, hard, disillusioned, never forgiving life for having so mauled her: of her coarse so-called father. . . . Then the stormy beginning of her teens, those dim days and nights when Cairns Gilmore was a menace: she still could not read the 21st Psalm without hearing the echo of stockinged,

HUON BELLE

stealthy feet. . . . Then the coming of Prim and a semblance of peace. The years between twenty and thirty were good years; years when the farm and interest in her home absorbed her utterly, she saw pride and safety blossom into the reflection of those years: no one in the Bay was more house-proud, more child-proud than Ginny Gilmore. She felt as secure as the Huon Belle itself lying immovable there at the head of the Bay. Then surely she would be a fool to stir up the muddy past, better to leave dead traces lying where they were buried that night when Cairns stood over her and bade her burn them. Yet she had kept the address safe in a locked drawer. Why? Ah, who directs?

CHAPTER III

SIMON SURPRISES THE BAY

SIMON's last present to Ginny had been a copy of Thoreau Walden's *Life in the Wood*, which she had acquired quite by heart in parts by the constant habit she had of slipping it into the big pocket of her gardening apron and taking it out to read while she was watering or resting from her labours on a garden seat. She had felt an added joy and pride in the tending of her garden this summer, for Simon's critical young eyes would view before long her sweet wilderness of flowers, his laugh would soon echo up the shady paths from the water, his tall figure would make its way across the well-worn track between Hill Farm and Sweet Water. *How* soon none but herself and his grandfather, bound to secrecy even from one another, knew.

One Monday evening Ginny put on her gardening apron, a shapeless affair made of sacking that (in spite of Prim's jeering taunts that it made her look like nothing on earth), she clung to affectionately because of its long association with peaceful hours among her flowers, and went out to water her bed of petunias. Holding her Thoreau in one hand, the hose in the other, she drew a long breath of relief and tried to forget household worries. She looked tired out, for Bella had gone straight to bed with a bad sick headache after hanging the big Monday wash on the lines, and all the clearing up and meal getting had been left to Ginny . . . she could not help feeling that Prim's selfishness was getting beyond everything when she had on the busiest day of the week announced her

HUON BELLE

intention of going over to the Lichfields, and had not yet returned to help get supper. She had an easy way of finding she had urgent engagements when housework threatened, had Primula.

Depression had settled like a black cloud over the still house all the afternoon, so as soon as Ginny had given her grumbling husband his afternoon tea at four and seen him safely off to the packing sheds where they were at work on a heavy shipment for the morrow's boat, she slipped thankfully into her garden.

Grateful velvety scents rose from the drooping petunias as she drenched them with the hose; she opened her book and read: "The true harvest of my daily life is somewhat as tangible and indescribable as the tints of morning and evening: it is a little stardust caught, a segment of the rainbow which I have clutched. . . ." "The *true* harvest," she thought, relief coming as it always did as her thoughts flung themselves out of the net of her mental entanglements and caught the author's idea. "Keep thoughts like that in mind and one creates one's own beautiful atmosphere; thank God for flowers and books, I feel as refreshed as my grateful petunias tell me they are, the dears. I . . . Why Prim——!"

The last as the gate was dashed open and Primula came flying up the path. And yet no need to ask what it was that made Prim cry before she reached her: "The most gorgeous surprise, mummy! No one can believe it! but it's true. Guess?"

"Guess, Prim? Why—why—where did you hear of it, at the Lichfields? How can I tell. Is it anything about Fairfax Lichfield and Primmy Gilmore? Is it?"

She was conscious of wishing to keep back the words that were behind those laughing, excited eyes of Prim's: the girl was dancing and twirling on her toes full of a light-hearted physical well-being, glad to be alive, piquantly glad that a

HUON BELLE

man was come into the Bay who could not but be impressed by the beauty that had come to her in his absence; for it was a glowing, eager, wonderful beauty of face and form; youth, sweet colouring, slim attractiveness; three graces that catch and hold the eye. Fairfax Lichfield and his brother Lindsay were both Prim's willing slaves, at all the holiday gaieties dances, picnics, parties, Prim walked over the other girls was clever enough to always know just whom she wanted to impress, knew to whom she could not be bothered to make herself delightful. Her mother had watched her and wondered *how* the girl had mastered already such assurance, such coquetry; and suddenly on this summer's evening Virginia felt herself looking at the beauty she had taken such pleasure in with a feeling of terror, it was as if underneath that fair skin she had seen granite. . . .

The soft peculiar velvety smell of the petunias rose and enveloped her; on their breath, as if on strong wings, she felt as if she were being carried up and out of the confines of her own clumsy body, away somewhere to giddy heights, looking down, looking down—into the open hearts of Prim and Simon, seeing the inevitable drawing of the one to the other, the outer attraction, while only *she* could distinguish the subtle fineness that kept the man's innermost heart sacred from probing, furtive fingers. . . . A violent trembling came—and was gone; the faintness that threatened passed, and with an effort she pushed all thought of the future and what she had in that flashing moment of intuition, seen, into a sternly guarded background. She loved Prim, she loved Simon, they were the two essential forces that ruled her life; and with a steady intake of her breath she was ready to make another guess nearer the mark, when Prim shook her head with a little scream of laughter at the hint that she and Fairfax shared a secret.

“No, no, no! Don't imagine I shall ever listen seriously to Fair's proposals! He is good enough to play with, but

HUON BELLE

I'd no more think of marrying him than a nice tame old elephant. He snorts when he laughs, he lumbers after one, and—and, oh he *is* so homely. I don't believe Simon—oh there, you are, I've let the cat out of the bag! ”

“Then they have heard from Simon that he is coming? ” Ginny moved the hose away from her petunias, the scent was too strong, too closely connected with that searching vision just past; she sprayed the water over a bed of seedling asters, her back half-turned to Primula.

“Not *coming*,” the girl cried, “why he is *here*, my dear! here at Sweet Water this minute, sitting talking to the colonel who can't take his eyes off him.”

“Who told you? How did he get here? ”

“Fanny told the Lichfield's shepherd when he went across with the rams. Fanny said he just drove himself quietly out from town in his own car and walked into the house as if he'd only left the week before! She said the colonel met him in the hall as calmly as you please. . . . I believe he knew all about it all the time, about him coming so soon, it's all been a silly secret so that people wouldn't make a fuss of his home-coming. Why mums, I believe *you* were in the secret, you knew he was coming to-day! you aren't a bit excited. . . . I think it's mean that nobody told me.”

She stood pouting, rubbing the toe of her shoe in the smooth gravel path, just as her father came with tired steps through the garden; he cried irritably:

“Hi! Don't do that, Bird, that gravel has been raked over this morning, it's bad enough to have your mother dragging the hose over it. Ginny, isn't it possible to water with a can? ”

“And carry all the water this close evening? ” She turned a flushed face to him, for his fussiness provoked her. “You're rather inconsiderate, Cairns.”

Prim came out of her sulks. “Oh, bother the stupid garden,” she said, slipping an ingratiating hand through his

HUON BELLE

arm in its brown linen coat. "Come and get changed into your decent clothes, dad, out of this old farm rig, and drive me over to see a nice 'English gentleman' at Sweet Water who has just arrived to give everyone a funny little surprise. I want to tell him we're not so tame in the Bay as he may have imagined, he can't just hide himself away even for the first day."

"Whatever does the girl mean?" Cairns shook himself free of her hand and took her by the shoulders, holding her. "What do you mean, Bird?"

"Why Simon has come. He's *home*. Now we shall wake up and have some fun. It's years and years since he's seen me, I'm dying to show him how I've grown up."

"But you can't break in on them to-night, Prim!" Ginny's voice held a note of sharp disapproval. "The colonel won't want anyone to disturb them yet; you can't dream of such a thing, besides, when we go I should think we should all go together."

"And be horribly proper. Oh, my loved parent, you do boggle things so, you make me feel as if I must jump over fences and kick up my heels out of desperation. Why shouldn't I just fly over there with you, dad, for a peep?"

"No reason at all, Bird, but your mother's sensitive feelings," he said sarcastically; a moment before he had come in tired to death, ready simply to fall into a long verandah chair and smoke until dinner time, but a spirit of opposition to Ginny's insistence galvanized him and he was ready to overrule anything she suggested. "No reason why the child should not see Simon," he said to her tersely. "I'll take you over now just as I am, Prim, if that will suit you. I can tell you I'm not going to dress up for young Simon; his values may have changed, but mine haven't. I suppose supper will be ready by the time we come back, Ginny? I shall not stay long, but I'm rather anxious to have a look at the fellow for myself."

HUON BELLE

“What fellow?” a laughing voice demanded from the gate. Their backs were all turned towards it, they had not heard his footsteps in the dust.

It was Simon who stood with his hand on the latch of the gate.

CHAPTER IV

INFECTION OF YOUTH

AND while his grandson walked with stick swinging and cutting at the docks beside the track, whistling softly as a relief to overcharged feelings, Colonel Severing sat back in his armchair with closed eyes exhausted. Yet nothing would have induced him to own that he was tired out with the unusual events of the day, the great day of Simon's return.

Resting there alone after the boy had announced his intention of strolling over to Hill Farm in the casual tone that discredited eagerness, he went over it all in retrospect; seeing much behind those shrewd old closed eyes of his, details, subtle changes in Simon that had not impressed him at the time. It pleased him to gloat over the day again in all its perfection, from the moment Fanny's familiar knock on the door told him it was half-past six in the morning. A wonderful woman Fanny, punctual, discreet, efficient; always good-tempered winter and summer, as regular a time-keeper as the clock that ticked away the hours on the mantelpiece: for years she had kept his life running in a groove of peaceful unworried habits, perhaps that is why at seventy-four Colonel Severing was as healthy and vigorous as could be, he had passed through his time of vexations and heartaches; and now, released from too acute feeling in anything or anyone he looked out at life through tranquil windows, his days slipped one into the other with unencumbered simplicity with the dignity only that comes with gentle age.

HUON BELLE

He was an early waker, seldom asleep after five o'clock. Fanny usually found him reading when she brought his tea-tray at half-past six; her welcome:

"Good-morning, sir. Slept well, I hope," never varied the year round; nor did his "Thanks, Fanny, you're bright and early this morning. Slept excellently. That my tea? Thanks, Fanny."

Nine times out of ten it was not true, what was the use of making a fuss about a lost sleep? what use this morning to tell her he had heard the clock strike every hour since that long-distance call from town at nine last night: the voice had said:

"Hullo! That *you*, grand? How are you? Good. Yes, yes, oh very well. Yes, I shall be with you by twelve to-morrow, too late in to come along to-night. You get to sleep!"

He went over his sensations again, hugged himself that no one had had an inkling that the boy was expected, he would not even tell the servants; but he rose, perhaps, fifteen minutes earlier than usual, making the dazzling morning an excuse, and while he lathered his chin, went softly in his slippers feet across the landing and opened the door into Simon's room. A waiting, subdued room, withdrawn into itself, yet impatient for the invasion of its owner . . . soon shoes would be kicked over that uncreased carpet, brushes would give life to that dead dressing-table, studs, ties, would be flung about, coats be hung over chair-backs, trousers . . . the rascal, always untidy.

Crossing the space to the window he opened it carefully, no use to have the servants flying up asking him reasons . . . soundlessly, that did it! Whew, what a day, gorgeous; no other word! The night's dew had given some mystic touch to the flowers down there, the distant hills were faintly veiled behind a swath of opal shot mist; mist and bush fire smoke hid the horizon, but hanging like a child's red

HUON BELLE

balloon broken from its string, the sun seemed to laugh at him standing there with his half-lathered white chin; he brought the suspended brush back to its work and his brown, finely lined skin, wrinkled into an infectious smile, called out by the clear liquid trill of a butcherbird seated on the half-hidden branch of an apple tree below.

"So you know he's coming, my friend! Well, keep your best notes, bottle 'em up till he comes . . . he always loved you and the magpies to spill music under his window. . . . Well, well, I'll be having Fanny after me!"

He was down to breakfast at eight sharp as usual, the bacon smelt good, but had no taste. He rose and pushed it off his plate out of the open window where Tatters cleared up the tell-tale mess, good dog, Tatters! no use people expecting an old man to eat when the stimulous that had been keeping him going this eight years, the final home-coming of young Simon, was but a few secret hours in the offing. That keeping things up for this very day had been his tonic, his life-giver, none like it, none like that sense of something suspended, to be reached for: in the fastidious trembling joy of the thought he could not have borne that a soul should be made aware of his nervous impatience, yet Fanny, watching him, heard him presently whistle Tatters, and make off down the path through the garden to the river, she thought.

"Something is on his mind, he's in a regular fantigue about something he's hiding from me, shouldn't wonder if it's about Mr. Simon. . . ." She stood at the kitchen window cleaning silver, and presently she saw him come back for the stick he had forgotten in the hall. He called through to her:

"Starting on my rounds, Fanny."

She always liked to know what he was about. She came through with the silver cup she was polishing and the chamois in her hands and asked: "Any directions, sir?" as he went through the front door.

"No. No one's likely to come, anyway, I shall be back

HUON BELLE

in good time; earlyish," he looked back over his shoulder with a three-cornered smile at her and caught sight of the cup in her hand.

"Ha, what's that you're polishing?" he asked abruptly, suspiciously. "What's that you're at?"

"Well, it happens to be Monday, silver day," she told him. "I thought to myself it's sure to be hot later with this heavy, sticky feeling about; misty over the hills always means heat if you ask me in February, heat-haze some call it; anyway, I thought I'll get my silver done and out of the way early. One of Mr. Simon's running cups, sir, it shines up something lovely, don't it?" She spoke proudly as if *she* had won the thing; funny creatures women, lovers of household gods, lovers of property, jealous of their rights. The colonel gave her an almost affectionate glance; what in the world would he do without Fanny to take care of his house.

"Beautiful!" he said enthusiastically, "beautiful. You're grand with the elbow grease, Fanny!"

"Well, I shouldn't like Mr. Simon to come all of a sudden and find we hadn't kept his things up to the mark," but as she caught sight of the momentary alarm that flashed across the old man's face she added hastily:

"I've been thinking like that for years, sir, I've been thinking every time come Monday and polishing day, 'we've got to keep up to the mark for Mr. Simon,' I'd think."

All the same, her faithful heart guessed from that hidden alarm of his that this day was going to be different, something going to happen, but if *she* guessed no one else should. She looked into the breakfast room and saw the toast rack still full, the marmalade not touched and nodding shrewdly, she went into the kitchen and said to cook:

"The master's hardly touched a mouthful of breakfast, make him up something extra tasty for his lunch, you know what I mean."

HUON BELLE

"Well——" Cook deliberated. "There's a nice tender chicken I was keepin' for his dinner."

"Then have that with a bit of bread sauce and a salad. I'd give them—him I mean, a roast for dinner, cook, you've got to see that old gentlemen like the master don't get off their feed, once let 'em and they're done," she said darkly.

"Well, if you say so, Fanny, of course he must have it. I've a queer-like feeling something's goin' to happen—if it's only rain. Just listen to that wicked butcher-bird, he knows, he's been a-pipin' there since afore six this mornin'."

"Cats know what's coming, too," Fanny retorted, "rain's coming all right, my good cook; look at your cat, look at Dorcas there washing herself, she's taking her paw right over her ears, a sure sign of rain that is."

"If you ask me it's a sign of visitors. Which reminds me that there Tatters has been stealin' again, he come round here with a nice rasher of bacon in his mouth and lies down on my mat to eat it."

"Did he, though?" Fanny's ears pricked up. "That dog never steals as I've often told you. Now you make a real good luncheon up, for what you saw Tatters with was the breakfast his master gave him, he never eat a bit of it himself, and if I didn't think Something I'd be worried to death."

"An' what is it you think, please?" cook asked, standing with bare arms akimbo.

"Never you mind, Mrs. Curious, you'll know soon enough. Now we better both get smartly to work and not stand argifyng here."

Down by the river the Colonel was looking over the boats: six weeks ago, when Simon first wrote of coming home, he had had them all repainted and varnished; a brand-new skiff lay on its side on the bank waiting to be launched, its graceful lines spick and span with dark blue paint.

"He got his Blue," the old man thought triumphantly, "I believe I'm more proud of that than of anything he did

HUON BELLE

at Oxford. There's something to show in that!—books, talk, examinations, lectures, they're all very well, but they're up in the air. Now there's something you can take hold of in his Blue, isn't there, Tatters?" He stooped and scratched between the dog's pricked ears. Tatters was a discreet and sympathetic person to confide in; the old man talked to him a great deal, there was little news Tatters did not know about Simon, although he had never seen him, and if the opinion of a dog is worth anything, Tatters could only picture Simon as a god!

"He'll have broadened a lot," the old voice had a note of relish as he turned with Tatters attentive at his heels to go along the terrace paths. "Let's have a look at the gladioli and imagine how they will strike him; can't remember if he is keen on flowers, anyway, boys seldom are; but he's a man now we've got to remember, Tatters, twenty-one when he went away, and away almost eight years, eh? Hard to believe it's as long as that, time flies when you're on the wrong side of middle age—yet you've only to look at that bonny maid of Gilmore's to see how we've all moved along, she's grown into a beauty, Tatters." But Tatters became suddenly bored, he didn't like "that girl of Gilmore's," she tweaked his sensitive ears and thought it funny when he whimpered, was angry when he snapped: she told him there were cats when there weren't any: if master was going to switch off the god and talk of *her*, well—there was a bandicoot's hole he knew of down under the willows. He made off quietly to the river.

And the colonel, intent only on his flowers and his simple and benevolent plans, fell to musing while he leaned on his stick looking at the double long rows of gorgeous heads of colour.

Primula! How she was shaping into the wife he wished for Simon. The boy was sure to have had his little affairs, but as far as he could make out, there had been nothing

HUON BELLE

serious; the Bay folk would be all round him like bees as soon as they knew he was back he hadn't a doubt, there were plenty of pretty, nice girls, but not one of them to touch Prim either in looks or fascination; there was something splendid in her slim strength, she compared in his mind with his famous gladioli, clean growing, full of vivid life, nothing scenty about her or about them, but a sort of defiant flaunting of their own acknowledged beauty; from the time they put up the first green shoots from their hidden corms, to the unfolding of straight, sword-shaped leaves and sheathed marvellous flames of fluted colour, they always appealed each year afresh to the Colonel's sense of perfection; and it seemed to him that Prim held herself in just such perfection as she developed, just such cool refinement. He passed along slowly, noting new blossoms that had opened in the soft, dark night. They were a silent army marching, showing up scarlet coats, the scarlet varieties were his favourites, Pythia, Virginia, Pasadena, there were as many as twenty blossoms open on Francis King. Simon would be taken with the yellows and the new Primulinus "Jewel," couldn't help it if he had any sense of colour in him; coming back from grey old England (as he remembered it) this Tasmania of sparkling atmosphere and brilliant colouring would be a feast to him. As if to give emphasis to his thoughts the colonel lifted his eyes to the hills, they were still misty, the sky clouding over. He looked round for his dog and whistled.

"Here, Tatters, Tatters, we're wasting too much time, I've to give the men their instructions about that two hundred bushels of New Yorks. . . . They must hurry on the picking, I hope to the deuce it's not going to come up a storm."

But as he stumped through the orchards his thoughts reverted again to the Gilmores. "Prim is going to be a rich woman some day, everyone knows Cairns has got a fortune buttoned up his sleeve for her, like as not she'll make ducks and drakes of it if she hasn't a steady hand beside her to control

HUON BELLE

the reins; they say Cairns is in a poor way with his heart, not likely to last much longer, and with an unsophisticated creature like Ginny for a mother—well, well. I can't say, but there is no doubt Cairns has never made the best of it for Ginny, she's too gentle, too unassuming to stand up to one of his calibre though it's kept her young that retiring manner of hers, young and sweet, she might be Prim's sister, yet she treats herself as if she were out of the picture; that young woman asserts herself before her mother, it's the only thing I've got against her . . . but they tell me Ginny was brought up to sacrifice herself for old Mrs. Gilmore, and I daresay with it all she is happy as most of the Bay folks with all their little jealousies and narrow-minded fads, though take 'em all in all, a kinder more hospitable lot of people you could not find to live amongst—rough most of 'em, but true friends, ready to help the lame dog over a stile without calling out how they've helped him to all the world. I'm anxious to see what Simon will make of 'em now that he's had a chance of making comparisons: what he will make of the changes at Hill Farm since he went away, the changes among all of us that will be more apparent to him because his own mental outlook will have expanded. But there's a sound theory that I drilled into him long since, a wise saying . . . 'It takes a many kinds o' men to make a world.' Well, we shall see! "

Yet the colonel had still loitered before going into the apple shed where packing was going forward; his eyes turned to the misty hills, he felt pestered with a sense of something hidden, veiled; there was a side to Simon he had never touched, a reserve: and how was the fellow's continual presence going to infect *his* life? He felt himself growing nervously apprehensive, youth could be ruthless, restless; abominably, though perhaps unconsciously, selfish. Simon might come along full of his new knowledge on every subject under the sun and want to remodel everything . . .

HUON BELLE

he wished he had talked it all over again with Ginny Gilmore or that Kant woman, they had sense! They would have given Simon a hint though: he was too proud to own that he felt he might in his old age lack courage. No, he must trust to the boy's generosity and choke this feeling of stupid uncertainty, and he found himself praying, as Solomon did, that he might himself have an understanding heart. . . .

His business with the men helped on the leaden morning hours, his subconscious mind was tense with expectancy, yet he walked here and there giving directions so much as usual, that not a man or woman guessed that within no time at all now, Mr. Simon, the topic of interest in the Bay (for everyone knew of his intention to come from England sometime in the New Year) would be among them all again. Laughter and talk broke out now and then among the busy packers, but for the most part they worked in a silence broken only by the whistling of the men as they emptied cases of fruit into the graders, the subdued thud, the soft rustling of wrapping paper, and at the end of the shed the smart, double rap-tap of nails being driven home in the lids of the packed cases. One of the men in charge of the packers came across to the colonel, tightening the string that held his hessian apron, a great brawny young Tasmanian who lifted the full cases and stacked them as easily as if they were pats of butter.

"We're getting a bit short of wood-wool, sir," he said. "Think we better order some in before we start on the Ripstons, they need a good wad of it under the lid. We're running out of stencil ink, too."

"Oh, ah!" Colonel Severing made a note in a little leather-bound book he carried. "When Mr. Simon comes he'll be able to jog my memory, Adson."

"Yes, we're counting on having him back soon. Suppose he'll be here before hop-picking begins, sir?"

"When's that—the third of March, eh, Adson? Well, I *hope* so!" He went off exulting in his little deception; he

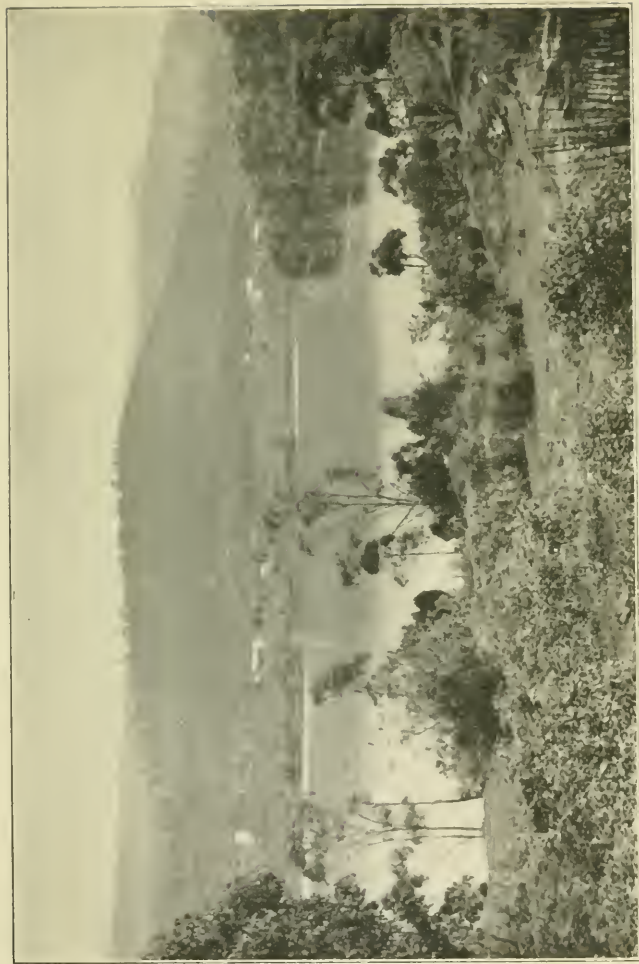
HUON BELLE

liked to think he could still keep a secret, was not a babbler like poor old Lichfield, whose sons treated him already as if he were in his dotage at sixty-seven; Fairfax indeed had gone so far as to have the brand altered to "Lichfield Junior," that seemed going it a bit too far, the argument was that he did all the work; the old man had taken a back seat too early and the boys were grasping young beggars—now if Simon—— He went off again on his speculations.

At eleven o'clock he was back in his study taking the glass of sherry and slice of seed cake that Fanny left covered on a tray ready for him when he chose to come in. When it was slowly finished he sat with the paper, always sent by the goods train at 10.30, on his knee, opened, but he hardly glanced at the news for his eyes under shaggy white brows, besought the clock to hurry. Could anything at this last moment have hindered him? an accident to that confounded new car of his? He longed to get the meeting over, feared the control he counted so much on might leave him, that Simon might find him trembling.

And at the very moment that his grandfather seemed to come to the last thread of patience in this eternity of waiting, Simon was slowing down his car half-way home; twenty miles from town he stopped to lift his eyes for the first clear glimpse of the Huon Belle.

He had left town early that he might make easy time all the way, for he wanted to savour every mile of his home-coming: to remember and gloat over every well-known bend in the road, every new-old vista, disclosed as the way turned and twisted. Climbing first the uphill wind along the sides of Mt. Wellington he left the sprawling town farther and farther below, looking over his shoulder he could see the harbour cupped in the hills, the houses were a sprinkle of mushrooms, the ships rode like shells on the wide, deep water, the Derwent was a band of silver stretching between mountains along its peaceful valley. . . . All drenched in sunlight the beau-



Belle Bay on a Summer's morning (early).

HUON BELLE

ties of his island birthplace were unrolled before his appreciative eyes; perhaps never before had he realized how he had pined for it. But now—he was home-along!

Climbing still, his humming car passed between sentinel gum trees and sassafras on one side, and on the other post and rail fences, telegraph poles, and mile stones, each bringing him as he passed it nearer . . . nearer to Sweet Water.

He took long satisfying breaths of the pure high air: what it was to be again among the mountains! they stood for something solid and grand to him: from a great height he gazed out over the ocean, certain words that he had always liked came into his mind . . . “the open firmament of heaven,” here, if anywhere, Simon thought is the open firmament of heaven. That clear sky! Then after the climb came descent, and most poignant moment that at which he paused, twenty miles from town, and lifted his eyes to the Belle.

He jumped out of the car and made her a low obeisance: there in the empty road to take an oath of allegiance . . . he swore he would live out the rest of his days in her domain, in the Huon Valley where she reigned Belle.

The little premeditated ceremony gravely over, Simon leaped back into his seat and sent the car bounding forward, sent her spinning down and down through the Valley where laden orchards began to tell him that he was nearing home. He whistled, he sang, sang lustily at the top of his voice every song he could think of; with his bright hatless head thrown back he looked like a flying Mercury: the wind carried away and split into silver echoes the song that he returned to again and again:

Oh, Danny Boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling,

From glen to glen, and down the mountain-side. . . .

Then he sang it softly in Italian into which language he had translated it. For the soft caressing words pleased him and he fitted the meter into the notes as he sang:

HUON BELLE

Oh! Danny, amor mio caro, il suon ti chiama
 Di clarin che di monte in valle scende;
 Sfioriscon già le rose, e il cor che T' ama
 Che ce' d'uopo partir cio' sol comprende
 Tu tornerai alla stagiou novvella
 O quando pur la bianca neve e bella
 Copre la valle. Ma un solo sarà il canto
 All ombra o al sol: Iot'amo tanto, tanto.

Ese un giorno totruato tu sarai,
 Alla stoigione che fiori pui non v'e,
 S'io morta già saro, tu cercherai
 La tomba mia; la pregherai per me.
 Ed io ti sentiro, per quanto lieve
 Il peso tuo sarà—Non così grève
 Mi sarà la tomba—Se tu pensi a me
 Io dormiro in pace e aspetterò per tee. . . .

At half-past eleven the train whistled at Sweet Water telling the Colonel that his mail bag had been dropped at the siding: ten minutes later he heard a man's step in the hall, and thinking it was Bristow the gardener with the bag, he opened his study door. A strange man in light tweeds was in the act of hanging his hat on the rack, an immense broad-shouldered fellow with queer, medlar-red hair, the coloured hair *he* had had until it went snow-white at fifty. The man hearing the door open looked quickly over his shoulder.

"Hul-lo, grand! I'm ahead of time—scorched down the hills. I told you twelve o'clock."

"Well, my boy——" Two pairs of hands met and held perhaps a fraction longer than was usual. Simon's throat muscles contracted oddly, he swallowed hard.

"I'm glad, gosh I'm glad to be home again! It's good to be back with you, grand. It's been a world of years away from home."

HUON BELLE

"Very good to have you back my boy—you've grown." The colonel's voice had a vague huskiness, he cleared his throat. Simon laughed at the idea of having grown, and at the sound they both gained the control that had threatened to slip away. It was natural and beautiful to have his grandson's long arm flung round his shoulders as they turned into the study.

"I can remember when you looked to me taller than any man I knew, taller even than my father, but I've topped you both by an inch or so, I'm six foot three, a useful three in a crowd! Well, and how's everything? As I stepped over the doormat just now I had the feeling I had only been gone a few months, funny! The old valley looks just the same with the road winding her way lazily under the hawthorns; Sweet Water hasn't altered barring the trees: They have grown beyond belief, and haven't you got a crop just! but as for the house," he gave his gay, infectious laugh that seemed to make the listening walls prick their ears and whisper: "It's not a day different! same hats on the rack, same chairs and thingummys in the same places, same grand, not changed a hair, you look fitter than when I went away."

"Nonsense!" But he had felt himself infected wonderfully by that vibrant young voice, strength seemed to flow back into him, he had been sitting there feeling faint, done-out, oppressed by the senseless quiet of the house; but suddenly the house was awake, the stagnant detached years were gone in a puff, those eight years without Simon: and with this vigorous awakening he realized how unbearably he had missed the boy Simon, and how whatever the man Simon should choose to do it could be never anything but exactly right, just *because* Simon did it. Woman's reasoning! A surge of affection so strong went through him that it was almost pain, and to cover it, he had said half-testily:

"It's that girl Fanny, she's always after me like a hen with one chick, I have no chance to get into mischief; daren't get sick."

HUON BELLE

There was the sound of the baize door leading from the kitchen swinging open and at the sound Simon went into the passage and called:

"Hi, Fanny, come here and lets have a look at you, I hear you are still a girl!" and as she came through, nearly dropping her luncheon tray in her astonishment, he seized her shoulders and gave her a sounding kiss on her comely cheek:

"One for 'perennial Fanny!' Gosh, if all the grand-fathers could have Fannies . . ."

"It's never Mr. Simon," she cried. "Never!"

He laughed and waltzed her round with the tray. "Oh yes it is, ghosts can't do this, I'm flesh, very much flesh after slacking all the voyage out. I've got to work it off, doctor's orders."

"Mr. Si-Simon, stop, I do beg of you now . . . give over pl-please!" she panted.

"All right, cook might grow jealous and poison us! No, I won't behave so again. You can't wop me now, Fanny, I'm too big. By Jingo, do you remember the drubbing you gave me for smearing the windows when you cleaned them, I used to breath on them and draw pigs and styes all over 'em! Well, Fanny, so you've all stood still and contemplated out here, nothing's changed an inch, you can't think how good that feels after all the rush and noise in the cities I've left the other side of the world."

"I hope we shan't be too quiet for you," she said staidly, straightening her white, starched cap while he carried the tray into the dining-room for her. He gave her a smile that implied a dozen things, gratitude for her faithfulness above all. He said undaunted:

"The same old Fanny, always the 'optimistic pessimist.' If it's too quiet, I can easily remedy the matter. Wake 'em all up, eh grand? I know a way of doing it, a deuced good way." His voice teased, but underlying his laughter the

HUON BELLE

colonel's ears were still sharp enough to catch a hint of something deeper; was there a note of triumph in his meaning, what secret had he up his sleeve that he meant to wake them up with?

All through the afternoon they were within call of one another . . . that vibrant humorous voice of Simon's was a delight to his ears, it held inflections and modulations that his training in lecturing had made it necessary for him to study, and the clear, concise rounding of his vowels! what a charm in the carefully guarded human voice, what a charm in the choice and claim of words.

After the tender chicken and special salad the colonel was left to take his forty winks while Fanny went upstairs with Simon to get his room fixed up, clean sheets, clean towels. She was inclined to be huffey over the open window:

"Shows as I guessed it was no surprise to the master your coming to-day, Mr. Simon. As if I warn't old enough to keep a secret! I'd have had all this done hours ago for you."

"My good Fanny was ever woman old enough to keep a secret, and the older the fewer as they say of a mouse when it spins . . . oh no, the higher the fewer! Well, it's much the same thing! I'm a bit outside myself to-day as the saying goes, the Bay air has gone to my head! But don't you be hurt, old dear, because I would not have you or anyone else told I was to arrive to-day, I had two very good reasons, one was that I dreaded the fuss of being met by a crowd and all that stuff—and the other was that I wanted to see one particular person before I saw anyone else (outside grand, of course), I've counted on seeing her first for so long that I couldn't have born to be disappointed over it—so you see?" He went over whistling with his sponge-bag and shaving paraphernalia to the washstand. His room faced east, and when he had put down the things he leaned out with both hands on the window-sill, drinking in the sweet

HUON BELLE

view of the farm enfolded by the quiet Bay, the river twisting and glistening like a shiny scaled fish between green banks . . . the trees he had climbed in boyhood; his face wore a look of such radiant happiness when he drew in again that Fanny nodded her head knowingly in sympathy.

"She has grown into a rare beauty, Mr. Simon."

And he with his thoughts flung here and there answered at random:

"Ah, but that was to be expected! With a mind so full of wonderfully lovely ideas how could they help being reflected in her face: it's not to be wondered at that I want to see her and thank her, first, for what she has helped me to be." He glanced through the open door, was that a quiet chuckle? The colonel was standing with his hands behind his back looking at the stuffed bird whose yellow eyes had once glared through the dark at Simon. He had caught the boy's words, they dove-tailed so exactly with his plans and hopes that he had been forced to turn his back, no use showing his hand too soon.

"Hullo, grand, why you've not had your full forty winks surely? I have not half finished this unpacking! but I say, I've just unearthed this patent shade for your reading-lamp. Wait till I show you the way it works. You fix it so——"

"Look, Mr. Simon, you go along with the master, I can hang all your suits for you and get your boxes tidied out. My, what a pile of shirts! And the socks he has—with ties to match, you say? Dear heart, but you're going to show the country young gentlemen how to dress, aren't you? Now just you be off, sir, my dear, and I'll finish for you."

"One minute, Fanny, then," he dived down to the bottom of a trunk, "here's something I brought for you, think it'll fit, eh?" He shook out a brown fur coat, "and there's a dress length somewhere for cook, I only pray there will be enough to cover her, I said to the shopman, 'Give me enough roughly, to cover a barrel!' Don't tell her, though, for the

HUON BELLE

love of Mike! Here are some little vases, too, for you both, I bought those from a black man in Ceylon; oh, they're quite gerin-proof! Now for heaven's sake don't try to thank me, there's a good woman—*all* said." He laughed and patted her shoulder, "D'you think I can ever thank *you* for looking after grand as you have? Well then! All I command of you is that you don't lay a hand on my box of books in pain of instant death, Bristow carried it up with the rest of the things, didn't he? Yes, there we are. You can do what you like with this chaos."

He went off catching his grandfather up on the stairs, linking his arm through that of the old man. They wandered out into the garden and it was found that Simon was an enthusiast on flowers, had seen more exquisite gardens than he could describe, both abroad and in his English summers. He admired the boats, "You'll hear me get up at five every morning for a row, grand. Or rather, I hope you won't hear me."

"Oh, I'm always awake," the colonel said; he looked at Simon quizzically: "You don't feel inclined to row down the river a bit—now?"

"No, I'm coming in to sit and discuss our neighbours now," he answered. "I've a thousand questions to ask about everyone and everything."

They sat deep in talk when Fanny knocked and said she had taken tea out under the lime trees: talking there while the light changed to a dull leaden hue with clouds banking up heavily in the west, Simon asked about everybody in and about the Bay except the Hill Farm people, managing with a dexterity that puzzled the old man to sheer away from all intimate talk of Prim and her parents; at length he said honestly: "To tell you the truth, grand, I want to form my own impressions, new impressions about them, other people don't matter, *you* can focus them for me, but not the Hill Farm people." So they fell to discussing the outlook of

HUON BELLE

hops in the market, "All this talk of a hop pool I read about in the papers, what's your idea of it, grand?"

They thrashed out Bay interests, and while they talked the colonel sat shrewdly making his deductions, setting a high value on the judgments of this new alert Simon with his sound theories and his sanity; taking a veritable pride, too, in his good looks, the fine thoughtful brow, with roughened hair pushed back from the temples; he had a habit of running his fingers through his hair, had eyes that now flashed, now danced, now dreamed as they reflected his moods; sensitive, clean-shaven lips, and with it all, the finished poise and controlled quiet of a gentleman : who was of his own flesh and blood, direct heir of the long line of the Severings. He pictured in comparison the two noisy sons of his daughter Margaret, who came down perhaps once in two years from their home in Sydney, who voted the Bay dull as ditchwater, who could find nothing to interest them; of whom Fanny said caustically when they went:

"Them's the sort of young sparks that would be bored in heaven, they'd have something to say about the harps not playing smart enough tunes like as not."

But there sat Simon pulling at his pipe, blissfully contented, saying:

"I can tell you, grand, I can hardly dare hope this is true yet, that I have at last arrived at my moorings, don't have to move on. To think *I'm here*, going, please Providence, to settle here to the end of my days! You know the root of all I've striven to be, of all my ambitions is in Belle Bay." And suddenly Simon got up stretching, and said in a consciously casual voice: "Well, I think I'll stroll over and say good evening to them at Hill Farm before dinner. I'll not be gone long, grand."

"Do; they'll like to see you. Don't hurry, my boy, on my account."

A secret happy smile lay on the colonel's face for a long

HUON BELLE

time while he sat with closed eyes in his library chair, dreaming there of Simon and his intense joy in coming back: what could he do in his simplicity of outlook but make pictures into the future . . . almost he felt the light touch of tiny fingers on the hand on his knee . . . almost heard a flute-like child's whisper, "Great-grand!" Simon and Prim's child! Hush, go gently.

CHAPTER V

INSIDIOUS POWER OF BEAUTY

AGAIN we must retrace to that hour which ended its tension for Simon at the garden gate of Hill Farm. There slept, latent for the most part, a great deal of the artist in Simon. In spite of his boast to Virginia in one of his earlier Oxford letters, insensibly outward beauty influenced and appealed to him, grace of line, harmony of colouring; the fair, finely-drawn features of women; the strength and balanced energy that is man's beauty, affected him in a greater degree than he realized. As he walked with vigorous steps along the once so familiar track between Sweet Water and Hill Farm, he became aware of the difference in his mental outlook; now that he was "home-along" he had the sensation of knowing the quiet loveliness of his island home for the first time in its true and intimate entirety; the restful tranquility of its towering, unchanging mountains, its boundary of blue sea dividing it from the immensity of the Continent of Australia of which it was at one time a part (for aeons ago, before the Flood, perhaps, the little island had been joined to the Mainland, where now Bass Straits washed roughly across the long-submerged neck of land); its mighty rivers, smooth flowing above deep under-currents; its mineral wealth and the marvel of its forests rooted in richest soil; so little, so sadly little was made of its resources: his thoughts turned inevitably to the men and women who dared venture into the virgin bush to clear and burn, that they might wrest a space

HUON BELLE

from jealous nature to plant and sow and reap the harvest; words that he had read lately in an old book of early Tasmanian days by one William Hay, drifted through his mind, the book was called *Captain Quadring*, and had told of the old convict days, Simon had been struck by the description of those early settlers who had come from their native England with the confidence of their great courage and endurance—the descriptive words ran something after this fashion: “And how *wonderful* they were, these people with their undoubted hardihood and bravery, decently clothed—their instinctive hiding of the attribute—their beautiful, delicate, inward art of being ladies and gentlemen!” that was it, of being ladies and gentlemen. He thought of his fine old grandfather, living his quiet, dignified life at Sweet Water, proud to have worked in his day with his men yet keeping always that distinction that had come to him from his stately ancestors; nothing he can do, Simon thought, will ever let people forget that he is of Severing blood: and there were many like him in the Valley, men who led the lives of simple English gentlemen in their own homes in spite of all the outward roughness and privation (far here as they were from the centres of society) that surrounded them: how different, how *condensed*, life was in the island of Tasmania compared to life in Australia; Australia with its prodigious tracts of unusable land, its heat, its droughts, its teeming cities that brought to mind the old world; but here, shut off, lived a race more subdued, less florrid than their neighbours over the water . . . the flaunting peacock and the humble sparrow! Intent on thoughts such as these Simon suddenly woke to the fact that the clouds were gathering for a storm in the dark lowering sky, colour was drained from the landscape to a strange, lurid light; it became a study in sepia, through it the river flashed and gleamed like a silver-scaled fish: beyond a motionless group of she-oak trees the next turn in the road would bring him in sight of Hill Farm; he had passed no one on the

HUON BELLE

way, and out of an empty world the sighing of the she-oaks sounded weirdly human, what made that curious sougning breath? he had often stood beneath them as a boy and on a breathless day looked up at the hanging brushwood and always it gave forth that soft sighing: along the river banks box trees covered with creamy blossoms where tiny beetles swarmed, alternated with osier willows; he loitered to admire the ti-tree bushes with their graceful white flowers; sweet briar berries had succeeded the pink roses and were already tinged with red . . . he remembered how fond his mother had been of stringing the berries, when they were bright scarlet, in June, and looping them over the pictures in her room like a child; he always thought of her now with a feeling of indulgent sorrow as Letty. Poor Letty!

A growl of thunder in the distance made him hurry forward, for almost insensibly he had been dawdling, savouring these last moments before he should stretch out his hand, and, once more, over a span of years, clasp Virginia's hand. At last he came to the gate leading into the garden at Hill Farm, and found himself brought to a halt with a stifling throb at his heart by the sight of those three figures together; he was scarcely aware of unlatching the gate or of any movement until their voices reached him, and then hardly aware of asking the question that brought them all round facing him. Yet laughter was in his voice when he asked: "What fellow?"

Sharp on his words came a flash of forked lightening that ripped the dark air and shewed him the little group distinct in every detail as if each figure were burnt into his sense of sight by fire . . . he had dreaded that he might not have a chance of meeting Ginny except under the curious gaze of others, and his fear was to be realized, for there stood her husband, and there, was it possible?—Lord, how she had shot up!—there stood Prim.

Between the toil-worn figures—the stooping-shouldered Cairns, the dullness of Virginia's almost covered by

HUON BELLE

a shapeless, soil-stained gardening apron—the girl stood out, revealed by that flash, poised gracefully, like a slim, glowing autumn poplar in her yellow dress; Simon received a vivid impression of brilliant loveliness, of consternation sparkling into excitement.

Thunder cracked over their heads and in a second great drop sof rain were slashing down. They cried to one another to run for the verandah, and in the tumult of laughter and panting exclamations, Simon's first welcomes were given. He could not have imagined such an impossible, such a hopelessly undignified meeting with the ideal woman his letters had been penned to; something in him flamed against the cruel incongruity of it, it was not fair that he should be first made to see her at such a disadvantage, her hat awry, her fair hair in damp whisks straggling from under it about her heated face; comfortable old gardening shoes made her feet more clumsy; she tripped on a step and would have fallen but for Cairns' arm seizing her; he growled that it was like her clumsiness! For Prim it did not matter, she flew up the steps like a bird, flung off her hat and shook her sleek, dark head and wet shoulders; then she danced up to Simon, radiant and confident.

She cried: "How dare you take us all by surprise? Didn't you guess we wanted to put up a triumphal arch and all be there to meet you? I'm going to kiss you for a punishment now!" She stood on tiptoes and put her lips to his chin. Just so far could her tall slenderness reach.

At the soft touch of her laughing mouth, Simon instinctively drew back; the impulse came as a shock. The next second he reminded himself it was only little Prim grown out of all knowledge, after all! the kid he had never taken any more seriously than his dogs or pony in the old days. He would have brushed the kiss off with the back of his hand *then*, was there any more reason he should take it seriously now? Any reason he should feel—well, like he did about it?

Thoughts raced through his mind while the thunder

HUON BELLE

rumbled its chariot wheels aloft, and rain came down drenching through the wisteria along the verandah, rain curtaining the hills, the river, the garden, as if a sudden bucket were being emptied from the heavens. The drumming it made sobered their voices, Prim, sulky after that moment of repulse, turned to help her mother unknot the strings and liberate herself from her gardening apron. "Can't think how you can wear the hideous thing," she muttered. "If you could *see* what you looked like, mother!"

Ginny's eyes were fixed on the ground while she fumbled with the tiresome strings, taking as long as she dared: for her first swift glance at Simon had showed her how very much she had to readjust in her mind before she could admit this tall, serious man to the old footing; shyness, more fitted to Prim than to herself, made her dumb. She would have liked to tell Simon how much he had changed, how he was as much changed from the youth who had gone away as Prim was from the child he had left behind. Yet Prim was not shy, she was too forward, too certain of her own perfections . . . the more strange in face of that had been Simon's involuntary recoil at her kiss. Hot, muddled sensations kept Ginny silent, and now her husband's voice, harsh, rasping, with the nasal Colonial accent that was always an outrage to her sensitive ears, broke in above the tumult of the storm.

"Well, and what do you think of us all now you're back, eh? Prim's grown into a lamp-post, hasn't she? She's going to make the Bay folk sit up presently, aren't you, Bird? going into an office in town, she says, to learn book-keeping and typewriting, no saying what girls now-a-days'll do, no good trying to make 'em stop at home and learn to cook and bake as their mothers did, eh?"

There was something boastful about the way he said all this, something that showed Simon where all Cairns Gilmore's pride lay now; yet he said:

HUON BELLE

"I thought it was always Prim's ambition to be the quickest picker and packer in the orchard!"

"Pooh, I never go near the old packing sheds," the girl told him frowning, "it's far too dull in this place for me, there's hardly a dance from one year's end to another, nothing but work, and talk of apples and hops at this time of year. But your coming is going to stir things up a bit. The Lichfields and I have been planning to have a dance and a welcome picnic for you."

"But I've come home to work." The gay, teasing note in Simon's voice altered to seriousness. Prim pouted. Cairns laughed, grimly amused at her reception of the little snub.

"What, the Bay got hold of you so soon?" he bleated. "Take a lesson, Blue Bird; I think you'll not be so keen to fly away if Simon's here, either. Well, I'm off to change."

There was an awkward pause after he went. The vibrating air seemed full to Ginny of more than the outward signs of the storm: some inward panic was beginning to take hold of her: her all-seeing eyes had lost nothing of Simon's attitude to Prim. His obvious surprise at her development, the attraction he could see no reason to hide. Prim saw it, too.

For now she began to treat him as she had discovered already that men like to be treated by beauty.

"Oh, *don't* grow into an old stick-in-the-mud, Simon dear," she coaxed with her arm slipping naturally through his, "don't for goodness sake begin talking of apples as if they were the only important thing in the world."

"Eve once thought them so, I've heard!"

"Oh *Eve*!" Her face was a study in pretty disgust. "We've surely grown more civilized than to copy Eve. She couldn't teach *me* much about wanting things. I take what I want, serpent or no serpent!"

"Prim, I can see I'm going to have a lot of trouble with you!"

HUON BELLE

“Are you, indeed. . . .”

Ginny, standing uncertain in the doorway leading into the sitting-room from the verandah heard their bandiage. Was this the Simon of her letters? she asked herself. This man absorbed immediately by the power Prim was able so unerringly to claim him with, the power of her ravishing young beauty. Ginny was bewildered. There were, there *must* be, two Simons. This was no more the Simon who had written those letters locked away upstairs, than *she*, homely Ginny Gilmore, was the ideal Virginia he had written them to. Out there with Prim he had forgotten her existence. Yet she would try him once.

She slipped noiselessly to the piano stool . . . and at first her playing could hardly be heard above the grumbling of long rolls of thunder: but presently there came a lull in the storm and the plaintive notes of the Londonderry Air stole through the room . . . out there to where they stood absorbed in one another. She could see them both leaning against the rail of the verandah silhouetted against the queer lurid light; the rain had ceased after that torrential downpour and after its drowning the world was unnaturally still, except for the distant growls of thunder that kept up the tension of storm.

She saw Simon lift his head suddenly and hold up his finger. He had caught the Air: heard Ginny's voice singing, hardly above a whisper:

But come ye back when summer's in the meadow
Or when the valley's white and hushed with snow
It's here I'll be in sunshine or in shadow. . . .

He made a quick movement towards the door: but Prim's detaining hand was on his arm. Her high, clear voice carried into the room.

“Oh, don't go in and listen to mother playing that sloppy tune! She's always at it. What I want to ask you is——”

There came at that moment a vivid flash of lightning and

HUON BELLE

almost on the second a terrifying crack of thunder right over their heads.

Simon caught the girl back from the rail violently, and held her while the thunder rolled away. They were both trembling. Blinded for the moment.

"God! I thought we were struck!"

"I believe *I* was! Oh, Simon, you did hurt my arm, you brute."

"Did I, Primmy? I'm so sorry. I hardly knew what I was doing. Poor arm, I'll kiss it better."

Ginny saw him carry the arm to his lips: the next minute Primula had thrown it round his neck and was looking laughingly up at him.

"What an old dear you are. I'm so glad you're back. I don't think I'll want to go away now."

"Won't you? That's very sweet of you, Prim. No! don't go, I'd hate you to. The Bay is the best place in the world."

"With you here."

"You darling. I'm going to kiss you for that!"

Ginny saw it all, heard it all. A strange, swimming mist enfolded those two figures. Voices seemed to shout from a great distance, "that sloppy tune, she's always at it."

Her hands fell limply from the keys, she felt herself falling and could not help the thud she made. . . .

Prim's unconcerned voice calling out to Cairns brought her to.

"It's mother, daddy. She's only fainted. You know the thunder always upsets her. She ought to have gone to lie down at once."

Ought to, yes, that was it, certain things only she ought to do. She had her place in the Gilmore household, and it wasn't her place to attract attention to herself. . . .

CHAPTER VI

THE SMOKE OF THEIR BURNING. . . .

A MONTH of fun and picnics for the youth of Belle Bay followed Simon's return. It was at once taken for granted that he was Prim Gilmore's escort, they were asked everywhere together, they somehow fitted in wherever they went, no gathering was complete without them.

And if there were no tennis party or moonlight picnic in the boats, Simon spent his evenings sitting smoking on the verandah at Hill Farm; he dropped at once into easy ways with the family; Cairns would be there grunting occasional remarks, Prim with her endless high spirits and fascinating graces, always under the conviction that she was the magnet that drew him: and in a shadowed corner, where she could see the outline of the Belle, Ginny would sit with the lamp-light from the sitting-room at her back and her face not discernible in the shade the wistaria threw. She did not often speak; she made excuse of headaches on the close evenings. Simon noticed much, and did not quite like the way Primula snubbed her mother if she gave her thoughts vent.

"Mother's dreams. Poof!" she was inclined to blow them away. "It's a good thing you've got a practical daughter, daddy. I can see right through to people's twisted backbones. Beggars don't go taking *me* in. Do you know, mother wanted to give that woman a pair of your pants this afternoon, and all the time, why, I know the man she lives with is no more married to her than I am!"

HUON BELLE

"Prim! I wish you wouldn't——" From an uncomfortable Ginny.

"Wouldn't what?" innocently. "Oh, *living* with you mean! Oh, my sainted aunt of a mother, do you still dream I'm wrapped in the swaddling clothes of infancy. How can I help knowing the obvious?"

The men laughed at her assumption of worldly knowledge: in this intimate family atmosphere Simon felt as if he would have laughed at anything the girl said; he was carried away by an intoxication of home-coming, after his years of exile everyone, everything was without fault. Perfect.

So when Ginny, as she came to do, hid herself in a sheath of reserve, if the thought of her silence crossed his mind it only struck him how quiet she had grown, but how somehow right it was that she should sit there peacefully . . . not chattering, just sit where it rested one simply to see her still hands clasped loosely in her lap.

"Daddy! Listen. I want a dance for my birthday."

"When is it, Bird?"

"Oh, darling, you know perfectly well. Don't pretend. The seventeenth of next month, March. A real dance. Music and supper from town, you know."

"Hum! Well, I suppose if you want it you must have it, eh?"

"Cairns, you spoil her. Prim's too young, a big dance means practically that we're calling her grown up. She really ought to go back to school for another year."

"You know I'm never going back. I hate school."

"Well, I think you're a very silly little girl, don't you, Simon? You will never get these years back. You're only half-educated now."

"And how old were you when you left school, please mother?" Prim asked, impertinent chin elevated. "I always understood you were an orphan much younger than

HUON BELLE

I am now when you came to live here with my Granny Gilmore. And I know you didn't go to school in the Bay."

Simon broke in, lazily crossing his legs:

"Now don't be rude. Ginny's your mother, Prim. And she is quite right. I'm going to be beastly priggish and quote Epictetus—he says: 'Choose to leave your children well instructed rather than rich, for the hopes of the learned are better than the riches of the ignorant.'"

Cairns gave a chuckle, and said, putting an arm round Prim when she went to perch on the arm of his chair:

"Never you mind, Bird. That's cackle from an old drake, isn't it? I'm going to make sure you have the riches, which I reckon in these days will carry you through better than any stuff old maids teach you at that school of yours. When do those book-keeping classes you were so keen on start?"

"Oh, sometime—but I'm not sure I'm going," airily.

"Then what do you propose to do with yourself?" Ginny asked.

"Oh, there's any amount to do now Simon's home. Don't fuss me, my dear."

"You leave her alone, Ginny," Cairns said with an edge in his voice. "My daughter's going to have a good time to make up for what I missed. You'd have her always slaving at something, wouldn't you?"

Simon began to realize what was going on between Ginny and Cairns over their child. Of course she was spoilt, but what a darling to spoil! He looked across at her holding a match to her father's pipe, her lovely intent face lit up for a moment in the glare of light. Of course she would wheedle her dance and anything else she wanted out of him!

Simon glanced across at Ginny in the shadows. Why didn't she show more fight? He could not make her out. He felt frustrated, stirred sometimes to anger with her for the way she had retreated into herself since that strange night of

HUON BELLE

the thunder storm when she had fainted soon after his arrival. He could not get an inkling of what it was that had changed her so extraordinarily. At times he thought he would write, but what could he say? . . . Intangible things looked foolish in face of Prim's healthy open annexing of him: and by the same token Ginny was always sending him off to find Prim if there was ever a remote chance of a private word. He bit into the stem of his pipe, watching her, trying to read through that obstinate reserve.

Then Prim's eager voice. "So it's all fixed. You'll come over and help me with the invitations, won't you, Simon?"

And at Sweet Water, Colonel Severing sat every night waiting and hoping that Simon would come back and say:

"Grand, I'm engaged to Prim."

The neighbourhood, too, was all agog for the news. They watched the young people with affectionate pride, they wished nothing better than that the houses of Severing and Gilmore should unite. Any gossip there had been in years gone by about Ginny was dead and buried: not one of the oldest inhabitants would have dug it up, they loved Ginny too dearly to hurt her, and the younger generation knew no more than Prim her own daughter did: that she was an orphan who had made her home with old Mrs. Gilmore, and had been like a daughter to her: that when the old lady died she had married the son, as was seemly. And now they wanted to see her daughter married to the Colonel's grandson. Rumours of Prim's dance were soon on foot; report had it that the engagement would be formerly announced then.

The week before it was to take place, Simon walked home from Hill Farm through a heavy pall of bush fire smoke: for days fires had been burning on the surrounding hills, and every night the red eyes of burning trees ran in chains pricking the darkness: sometimes a whole hill-side would be studded with lights like the lights of a town: sometimes the

HUON BELLE

dull, red glow would be reflected in a heavy sky. For days the Huon Belle had been completely hidden under the pall; if the sea breeze did not come soon, Ginny felt she would stifle. She had watched Simon go without a word but a quiet good night, though she had been trying for days to key herself up to break through and tell him that she hoped he and Prim were going to be very happy. The words sounded too thin in her own room when she said them aloud, thin and untrue. Better keep quiet.

And at Sweet Water the old colonel was trying that evening to whip himself up to say much the same thing when he heard Simon's step in the hall. Stupid to mind asking the question that trembled on his lips. . . .

"Hullo, grand—you're sitting up late!" The boy was in the room, all practical solicitude. "If I'd guessed you would make such a long evening of it here alone I would have stayed with you."

"No use going up to bed, I can't sleep in this heavy atmosphere, Simon, I'd rather stay down here reading than toss about."

"I daresay you're wise. . . . Half the Bay seems on foot watching the fires. We're lucky to be so well cleared round the orchards: the Saltashes had a narrow shave with theirs last night. A dawn wind sprang up and fanned the embers in a hollow tree, and before they knew the fire was sweeping right down to that top orchard of theirs . . . however, they beat it back before it had got a hold, though they lost twenty or more fine trees."

"That's bad." He wondered if Simon guessed what he wanted to ask and was keeping the conversation going on purpose.

"Yes. And they nearly lost little Sally, too, the fools. It seems the children have been sleeping out on that low verandah at the back of the house. Sally went to sleep with a mug of milk beside her, and in the night woke thirsty and put

HUON BELLE

her hand out to reach it—gave a piercing shriek and they rushed out to find a three-foot black snake hanging on her hand! Evidently driven out of the bush by the fires: tracked the milk and was helping itself when Sally happened to reach down."

"You don't tell me! Those Saltashes with their ten children are always in the wars. Well——?"

"Oh, Fairfax Lichfield was there helping beat the fire and he threw the kid on his motor-bike (when they had cut the wound and sucked it and rubbed in pomagnate) and rushed her off to the doctor. She's still pretty dopey to-night, but he says she'll be all right. Mrs. Saltash nearly went mad, they told me! It's always a bad month for snakes this. They're vicious."

"Yes. . . . All well over at Hill Farm?"

"Awfully well, to all appearance, thanks! Though the new doctor tells Cairns if he doesn't ease off work he'll have a bad smash-up presently with that heart of his: still, he seems all right. Ginny's the one I can't make out, she seems completely changed to me—painfully subdued—I wonder if he's good to her."

"I don't think he beats her, if that's what you mean! I daresay she seems quiet in comparison to that gay young woman Primmy. A lovely, sparkling creature that, eh, Simon?"

"Wonderful!" Simon answered and got up yawning, "fancy actually persuading that skin-flint Cairns to give her this swagger dance! Perhaps you've hit on the reason I thought Ginny changed: after all I keep forgetting I'm a Rip van Winkle, more or less, in the Bay. Well, I'm off to bed, grand. Don't you sit up till morning!" and he went out, leaving the colonel nonplussed. Dammit, was the boy deliberately avoiding discussion of Prim?

And it was next morning when Cairns announced his intention of making an early start, driving himself to town and

HUON BELLE

back to see his lawyers, that Ginny made a decision. She would once more (but this time on her own initiative), burn bundles of letters. Prim said she was meeting Simon at nine o'clock to go for an all-day picnic in the boats, the Lichfields were going and half a dozen others. They were to land across the river somewhere in view of the Cow and Calf, the sharply peaked mountains that also went by the name of Adamson's Peak.

So by ten o'clock the house was empty and silent except for the muffled sounds of Bella with her brooms and dusters. It was the day for turning out the dining-room: she was making a hurried business of it because the fire was lighted in the laundry and the irons already heating, for Prim had begged her to iron out some silk frocks. "Iding ebery day, poor Bella id now," she had grumbled. But Prim, with a sounding kiss had yelled into her ear: "You know you love doing them for me, you old angel—*angel*." And Bella would have dropped dead rather than not do them.

Ginny climbed to the attic which had once been her bedroom, but which had long been used only to store old boxes and rubbish; no one went into it but herself. Prim had no curiosity, she never from childhood had wanted to rummage for hidden treasure; all her treasures were on the surface, visible. The White Bed stood stark of covering, pushed over against the wall. Boxes and the old suitcase lay under it, and to one side, near the window, was the locked bureau in front of which Ginny had been want to stand brushing out her pale hair while her gentle eyes rested with living affection on the Belle. She stared out now, thankful that a wind had come in the night and cleared away the pall of smoke. There She lay uncovered: always with the same calm majesty, the same tranquility; producing the same effect upon Ginny of certain solace in her distresses. Whatever happened, there, always stretched within sight while she lived, was her beloved Belle. Nothing she must think or

HUON BELLE

do or say must ever defile the example of quiet dignity she had set up for herself to emulate. And the thing of vital importance for her peace of mind just now was to destroy all those feelings, those dreams that were wrapped for her round Simon's dear letters.

Fitting a key on her bunch of keys into the lock of the top draw of the bureau, Ginny pulled out the drawer. It was full of neatly tied piles of letters. Taking out one packet after another she packed them into the apron she held gathered up in one hand. . . . They must all go, no use for half-measures: but a single leaf dropped out; she picked it up and found written upon it the address Simon had sent her just after he left Oxford: it was written with the address of the old Laird, her grandfather—she had forgotten. A riving pang shot through her at the thought of how she had planned to tell Simon when he came home the things she could not write about her early childhood. . . . No use, she never would tell him now. He would have to tell Prim; husbands and wives should not start married lives with secrets; and what would Prim have to say when she heard her mother was an illegitimate child? What would Simon himself say? No, she had no wish ever to tell him the strangeness of it now, he would never be interested like that in *her* again.

All the same, all the same . . . there was no reason why she should not write to that very old man, her grandfather, and tell him how sorry—no, how glad—What did she mean? But supposing anything should happen to her and letters or address were found? She would write the address on an envelope and burn the slip of paper with the rest. She tucked it into the bosom of her dress, and gathering the ends of her apron firmly together with the whole budget of papers ran swiftly downstairs and into the laundry. There, at the open fireplace she stood throwing on the fire lit to heat the irons to press Prim's many frocks, one after another those dear letters that had been the precious hidden treasure in her life for years.

HUON BELLE

"Don't cry, silly, it's no earthly use to *cry*," she found herself saying. . . . "Spiteful minds could interpretate *anything* into those letters. They must *die*."

A crash came from the dining-room just as she had flung the last bundle on her funeral pile; a crash, a silence, and a heart-rending cry from Deaf Bella. Ginny pushed the sheets that were not already black ash together with her foot into the middle of the flames and ran into the dining-room. There stood Bella, like the big, simple lunny she was, wringing her hands and blubbering over a little heap of broken china on the floor.

"Oh, Mitti Gilmore," she moaned, "I broken the plitty china dog, the one wid a chip offen imb. Oh, not for notten would gread clumsy Bella 'av done id, 'he 'o carefully d'uts de manplepie ally; but hurrying for Mitti Prim done."

Ginny stared. Her letters all gone up in smoke . . . and now her little china dog, his pathetic red spots scattered, scattered. . . .

"You're crying," Bella sniffed. "Oh, Mitti, Bella could kill her'elf."

"No, I'm not, not for that" Ginny shouted at her. "It's all right, Bella, everything has to break some time. Get the dustpan. No, I didn't say pain, I said *get the dustpan: dustpan!*"

She stooped herself to collect the pieces; and among them found a tiny scrap of paper screwed into a ball. Evidently all these years it had been lying in the hollow inside of the china dog, pushed far up, wedged into his head. Sitting back on her heels on the hearthrug, she untwisted it idly wondering whose fingers had screwed it so tight. Then she caught faded inkstains upon it, and smoothing it quickly made out clear words. They said:

"This is to certify that I, Elspeth Lee (nee Cameron) am the mother of Virginia Elspeth Lee. And that she is the granddaughter, born in rightful wedlock, of The Cameron of Bridge-of-Allen in Scotland."

HUON BELLE

Then followed the full address which was identical with that which Ginny drew from the front of her dress.

With a feeling of superstitious haste she went to Cairns' writing-table, and putting both papers in an envelope she wrote a formal note stating how she had come by the paper her mother had written thirty and more years ago. She signed her name fully with the address of Hill Farm, and thrust the envelope addressed and stamped into Bella's hand as she came back into the room. It must not be left in the house a night.

"Run, Bella," she shouted, "that must catch the mail to-day. Run to the post-office while I clear this up. It must go. Run, *run*."

Obedient and eager to show her repentance, Bella ran.

The postmistress was in the act of tying the letter-bag; but she slipped the envelope in, having stamped the post-mark, just in time. . . . And so that day there left Belle Bay, sealed in a canvas bag, the fate of Ginny Gilmore.

CHAPTER VII

BELLE OF THE HUON

PREPARATIONS were now in full swing for the dance. Acceptances to invitations had come from all over the country-side, even from town, for Primula's friend Pam was coming with a carload of friends. Although it was a busy time for all the orchardists they were all coming to acclaim pretty Prim Belle of the Huon. Sweet Water was at its busiest with apple picking and packing in full swing, and hop picking had begun on the 3rd of March. "And after this," Simon told Prim, "I've really got to end picnics and all that. Really, Primmy dear. I wish it was not so hard to resist you, you witch! What do you suppose I came home for?"

"To—marry me," she almost said, but changed it in time to: "Why, to amuse me, of *course*." Amused as he was at her audacity he yet was inclined to lecture her. He said, opening the gate for her to go through, for he had just brought her home from a drive in his car:

"I came home with the intention of taking some responsible position at Sweet Water: of working for my grandfather. I haven't done much of it yet. You're a champion time waster, aren't you?"

"I'm what you make me," Prim said in a low vibrating voice. Her beautiful flushed face took a repentant, unexpectedly docile look. The man was touched.

"Sweet Primmy! All right, my dear, I'm your servant until after the dance. After that it must—end."

HUON BELLE

"It's such fun to have you to play with," she pouted.
"Don't work, Simon."

He had begun to climb into his car, but stopped with his foot on the step to look over his shoulder and say:

"Haven't you ever realized that people are much happier if they work? Has your mother never told you that. Gosh, *she's* worked."

"Oh, I daresay, but *she's* different."

"Yes," Simon was lighting his pipe, with head bent, "yes, *she's* different."

"How queerly you said that," the girl said, leaning on the gate. "Well—till to-morrow, Simon." She blew him a kiss and was away up the path like a firefly. To-morrow at the Lichfield's water party perhaps he would propose: she was certain he had been on the verge of it times and again: anyway, in three days time would come the dance. . . . In her silver dress with its trimmings of darling yellow roses, the girdle, the swinging, wide skirts decorated with roses, she would be irresistible.

"Simon, Simon, Simon, I'm going to *have* you," she chanted as she ran through the garden. "Oh, for a gorgeous night!"

And when at last it came the night was gorgeous as even spoilt Prim could wish.

Boats, with their loads of guests, crossed and recrossed the silky white pathway the rising moon stretched across the Bay. Later, as she rode high in her full splendour the cup of the Bay, the garden, the roadway where lines of cars waited, the homestead, all were filled to the brim with powdered moonlight. There was no breath of wind, but the cool air swam up from the cool waters and fanned gratefully about the gay figures on the verandah, in the garden paths, down on the little jetty, where they streamed out when the music stopped.

Prim's dark beauty radiated like a flame: men could not drag their eyes from her nearness as she danced with them;

HUON BELLE

she overshadowed every woman: she made every girl in the room insignificant by comparison.

"Where's the Belle? Seen the Huon Belle anywhere?" men asked as they looked for her to claim the dances they had booked.

Ginny watched her triumphs with half-incredulous eyes. Was this glowing, self-possessed creature, sought after, flattered, full of some vital compelling quality that made men glad to do her bidding, really *her* daughter? She moved about in her black velvet dress talking to one and another of her friends, a charming if shy hostess. No one felt themselves left out in the cold or neglected in Ginny Gilmore's house.

Towards midnight when the dancers looked as if, after the wonderful sit-down supper they would go on dancing tirelessly to the enticing music of the string band until morning, Ginny slipped out quietly to a corner of the verandah, where, standing half-hidden by the wistaria, she could gaze out at the mountains and rest. The whole world was clear as day under the white enchanted light of the full moon. The outline of the Belle lay clean cut against the night sky . . . so achingly beautiful that Ginny with her heart breaking with some unspeakable weight of loneliness in the midst of all the laughter and fun, turned half-ashamed to go back into the house: but as she moved she became aware of Prim and Simon moving through the verandah towards the garden steps. For a moment her heart almost stopped beating as Prim's voice floated back:

"Oh, Simon, don't be a silly old stupid: what can you want mother for? I suppose she's sitting up talking to the old ladies who pull us to bits . . . bit by bit! . . . I suppose you know what they're all saying about you and me?"

Ginny heard no more. Their voices, his answering she knew not what, faded away down the garden path, and with one look at the indifferent Belle, she crossed and entered the brilliantly lighted rooms once more, dazzled by the glare of

HUON BELLE

electric light that had needed so much wheedling on Prim's part to get out of her father's tight purse.

And outside the moonlight, so cold in comparison, cold and aloof as that indifferent Belle, filled the empty Bay.

Ah, but was she so indifferent? Was she not sublimely conscious of the pigmies beneath her who were so sensible of their importance. That fairy like figure whom they were calling the Huon Belle for instance? Did she for a moment know what was coming to her. . . . Luring the entranced man beside her down, down through the trees of the garden, down to a seat by the water's edge, a narrow seat where it was natural to throw an arm along the back . . . the most natural thing to draw her within that arm and whisper: "Prim, you're the most lovely thing I've ever seen! Darling, you shouldn't have brought me down here . . . I can't help it, kiss me, kiss me, Prim."

And the whiteness of the figure melting into his arms, yielding, whispering passionately against his hot, asking lips.

"Simon, Simon, oh Simon, I was longing . . . longing."

Cold, distant, aloof, the Belle lay, face to sky.

So much for human passion! Selfish, shortlived. . . . "I was longing. I."

And later, far later when the day star was swinging up from the horizon, and still sounds, sounds of music and laughter, music and dancing streamed from the house, no one but the Belle surely knew that a man went wandering alone to the now empty seat by the water . . . that he stood listening, listening to the lap of water under the little jetty, that he suddenly staggered as he stood, and clutching at his breast, sank gasping for breath where so lately the fairy his gloating eyes had followed all through the night, had sat. No one but the Belle saw him right himself with a dying effort, try to call . . . sit, panting with his eyes starting from their sockets in agony . . . saw him lurch forward,

HUON BELLE

drag himself into the bushes and fall prone on the ground with a cry that no ears but the Belle's surely caught:

"Bird . . . Blue Bird!" and lie there still as the waning moonlight itself; hour after hour, until the hot sun scorched his evening clothes. . . .

PART IV
CHAPTER I

TELLS HOW CAIRNS GILMORE LEFT HIS WILL

IT was old Charlie the yardman at Hill Farm, who found the body of his master at noon next day, huddled in the bushes at the foot of the garden.

No anxiety had been felt when Cairns disappeared before the end of Prim's dance—he had, at about one o'clock, told Ginny that he felt fagged out and thought he would turn into bed up in one of the unused attics, so that he would not be disturbed when the guests at last went.

Not until late the next morning did anyone go to disturb him—then it was Ginny who went up with his breakfast on a tray thinking he had slept in late—to find the room had never even been occupied. . .

There followed inevitably an inquest; at which a verdict of death from heart disease was brought in.

During the days that followed, both before and after the funeral, Ginny and her daughter hardly spoke to one another: they were both completely staggered by the blow; and in their different ways were fighting for control of their feelings. Ginny could not think clearly, she felt too shaken, too dulled in mind to look yet into the future. It was sufficient for her to grasp the one fact that Cairns—Cairns, who had dominated her life for eighteen—no twenty-two years (for before she married him she had always been conscious that he was watching—waiting) had passed through the doors of Hill Farm—never to come back.

HUON BELLE

His funeral procession, as old Mrs. Gilmore's funeral had, passed through the gates and up the winding road to the cemetery. But the procession that followed Cairns for the last time was long and important. Everyone in Belle Bay attended it, for the name of Cairns Gilmore was a name carrying great weight.

If Ginny's mind strayed while she sat in the darkened house, it strayed no farther than the orchard. It did not for a moment enter her thoughts that she would ever live anywhere else than the farm—no warning came, no premonition, she would simply carry on as Cairns had taught her. She understood the working of land now as well as a man; the seasons for spraying, for pruning, for fruit picking, and almost to the bushel, what the fifty acres of trees in bearing produced: the crop last year had been between twelve and fourteen thousand bushels, this year it would be more. Gourly's Bit had added thousands of pounds to the value of the farm.

So Ginny kept control of her thoughts—there was safety in the orchard; to it at least her heart had been faithful since ever her eyes first saw it upon that dim autumn evening—years—years ago.

But with Prim who could say in what dark passages her mind travelled? She shut herself in her room, giving orders to Bella to bring her meals there. How deep her love for her father had been Ginny could only guess. True, where she wanted anything, Prim had been all affection, her pretty, demonstrative ways had won her what she wanted. But at other times, had she not shown a callous lack of interest as she grew up, in all that interested Cairns? To Prim his love for the land was as inexplicable as her mother's love for it was.

And now in her bedroom Prim was telling herself she hated and loathed the farm; that she supposed it would be left to her mother and she would want to go on living there,

HUON BELLE

living, working—dying; like a horse on the place, or something like that. But she shouldn't keep *her*, Prim, there; no, not for a minute! Already she was planning to escape. She had written a letter, even before the funeral, to her friend Pam in town, and sent Bella out secretly to post it at night. In it she begged Pam if she loved her to ask her to at *once*; she simply couldn't bear the farm—shut up with her mother—another minute. "She goes creeping about like a shadow," Prim wrote, "with a holy-martyr expression on her face. Oh, what *is* the good of pretence? Everyone knows how she and father were like a wolf and a mouse chained together. I don't know why they didn't get a divorce long ago for all the affection they seemed to exhibit for each other. I suppose because of me! they needn't have worried, I always meant to clear out as soon as I could and have a good time. I'd have gone a month ago, but Simon came (isn't he simply the nicest looking thing you've ever seen?) But I think he's going to be—tiresome—about living in the country. Anyway, I'm not *going* to, and I shall tell him so flat, when I see him, after all this upset. But I have not see him since the dance, it's too bad. I'm really furious. Write soon, Pam, or I'll go mad in this awful place. I've nowhere to go unless you ask me."

The reason for Simon's absence, Prim chose to take as a personal insult, although he had written explanations both to her and to her mother.

Poor old faithful Fanny had been found dead in her bed—cerebral hæmmorrhage, the doctor said: Colonel Severing was so terribly distressed about it that Simon could not think of leaving him.

The long days dragged on to the end of the week when Cairns Gilmore's Lawyer from town was coming to read the Will.

When he arrived Prim came down for the first meal since her father's death. She entered, greeting her mother as if

HUON BELLE

she were the most loving daughter in the world. Mr. Flinton, of Flinton, Steel & Lock, was impressed by her air of solicitude, by her beauty and her subdued sorrow. In her white dress with its black embroidered hem she looked plaintive, crushed. He thought—"The mother won't suffer with a sweet daughter like that to turn to."

After lunch they went, for the Will only concerned the two, into the sitting-room. The curtains had been drawn, sunlight fell where the last frilled petunias were massed in bowls, and through the open window the Bay could be seen stretching blue under the blue sky. Ginny sat down where she could watch the light and clouds shadows on the mountains. She glanced at Prim. The girl was sitting huddled together, chin in hand, watching the lawyer take a long envelope out of his bag at her father's writing table. Queer what imposing, what exciting things came out of envelopes!

"If you are ready I will begin—it is very short—very concise; the only Will the late Mr. Gilmore ever made to my knowledge; and this he made only a few weeks before his death. He came especially to town——"

That day! The day she had burnt Simon's letters. Ginny heard his rather precise voice—"I, Cairns Gilmore, hereby swear that this is my last will and testament"—after that she listened dumb-founded; for her own name came only in the smallest clause at the end.

The clause ran:

"To my wife—Virginia Gilmore (nee Lee) I leave the sum of £100: to be paid out of the estate by my daughter Primula. I think she will understand.

And to Prim was left everything as it stood, house, furniture, the whole of the buildings and orchards at Hill Farm valued at £9000, with the sum of Five thousand pounds lying at the present moment in the bank. She was made sole executrix.

HUON BELLE

And to Ginny, £100: with "I think she will understand."

All these years, then, Cairns had bottled up his grudge against her for that information she had withheld and for the gray lie she had told him. Suddenly she heard his sour voice out of the past: "You can stay and work for me. There it ends." Was it possible a man could take all the best years of a woman's life and leave her for reward £100? £100 out of his great riches, to keep her from starving! She looked pitifully across at Prim. Prim was not acting now. She found it impossible to keep her expression subdued. Her eyes flashed, her lips curved, vivid colour flooded her cheeks.

"Oh, how good—how good of daddy!" That was all. No word for her. No sympathy for her mother. Cold, self-centred as ever Cairns had been.

Without looking at her again, Ginny rose, and crossing the room, shook hands with Mr. Flinton. "If you will excuse me," she said very quietly. "You will have a great deal more business to go through with my daughter. It would be better for me to leave you alone."

At the door she was impelled by an anger stronger than herself to demand one question. Suddenly she said:

"Did my husband, did Mr. Gilmore, give *you* any reason for this Will?"

The lawyer dropped his eyes involuntarily before the look that he had caught on the widow's face. He felt his lips with uncertain, nervous fingers.

"That question I am not at liberty to answer."

Ginny turned and walked through the door, chin high. Then Cairns had stooped to discuss her with a stranger! The flame of disgust that burnt her helped to clear her of the thick heaviness that had weighed her these last days. At any rate, she was free of all forced feeling of sorrow.

CHAPTER II

TELLS OF PRIM'S DECISIVE ACTION

CONSTERNATION reigned in Belle Bay when the contents of the Will were known. Consternation was the only word.

News passed from mouth to mouth rapidly; swiftly as wind blows the placid waters of a pool, the news passed, and in a day it was as if a storm of words surged—beat about the names of Gilmore and of Hill Farm.

Naturally, as soon as it became known Cairns was dead, curiosity as to how he would divide his estate had been rife; in small places, especially isolated country places, a good, healthy curiosity surrounds everyone's affairs. The general opinion had been that Ginny would have everything for her lifetime. Then—the bolt from the blue. To Ginny £100—and to Prim everything. Everything! The—the insult to his wife. Who could have given even Cairns Gilmore credit for such an inhuman action? The secret diabolical cruelty of the man.

Talk threshed the matter up and down, back and forth, over every detail of the Gilmore Will. The conclusion they all formed was, that the most iniquitous thing of all, was the fact of having left a girl of seventeen complete mistress of a fortune. There was not one clause or reservation—not one stipulation—no “until she comes of age.” No, Prim was free to do exactly as she pleased—she could sell the orchard as it stood—she could cut it up—she could play ducks and drakes with the money and with that in the bank. No hand

HUON BELLE

could stop her—least of all her mother's. When they realized what she meant to do the storm reached its climax.

After the lawyer had gone back to town, Prim had remained excitedly turning over the papers he had left. Without a doubt, Cairns had been impressed by his daughter's cleverness; "clever as paint," he had thought that morning she had told him she wanted to learn shorthand and book-keeping to help him—Mr. Flinton had told Prim that when her father went to make the Will only a few weeks after that talk, he had said: "I'm not going to have her hands tied. She's got more brains than most—I'm leaving her free—she won't do anything I wouldn't have disapproved off."—Oh! wouldn't she?

Prim sat on a corner of the table swinging one foot—gloating over the papers.

"Rich, my dear," she said aloud, "*rich*. Why you've got—and will have, enough money to buy anything—any jolly thing you want."

"I suppose I ought to find mother—it's a big, nasty shock for her." She hummed as she left the room doing a two-step—then stopped—perhaps that was hardly decent.

She called: "Mother, where are you?"

Impatiently searching she at last found her. Ginny had put on her old gardening apron and was working in her garden. She had *had* to do something—had to—Prim stood watching her without speaking for some minutes. Her mother was kneeling, weeding a bed of asters with a hand-fork; she had grown the seedlings, watered, tended them, they were magnificent Giant Crego Asters—great, plummy flowers on long stalks. She felt Prim's eyes upon her, and suddenly the thought flowed through her mind. "This is Prim's garden now." When Cairns was alive he had at least left her to do what she liked with the garden, he hadn't bothered, had seldom gone near it, but what would Prim want to do?

HUON BELLE

She sat back on her heels awkwardly, pulling off her leather gloves. "Well, Prim—it's all wonderful for you."

Prim nodded casually.

"Yes, it is rather. But, of course, I'm not going to keep on the farm."

"Not——?"

"My dear mother, is it likely? Good heavens, fancy being saddled with this great place. Do you imagine for a moment I would bury myself here? Of course, I'm going to sell it—I told Mr. Flinton so before he left, and he's going to put it in the Agent's hands immediately; advertise, too, on the mainland: and if after 3 months it hasn't sold, I shall cut it up——"

"Cut it up—cut Hill Farm up, Prim? This splendid property—that your father worked all his life to perfect! Give it to 'cocky' farmers. You must be mad!" Ginny was on her feet, white with anger. Prim shrugged.

"Oh don't—please—mother! Stop pantomime. . . ."

Cairns' voice out of the past, "Stop pantomime and get down to real life!" She caught her breath—Cairns was not dead, he lived in Prim—the granite-hard unimpressible nature—the cold voice living again in his child. She said shrilly: "As long as they pay me for it."

"But your father loved the land—look how he worked! It was the one thing (besides you) he lived for."

"And look what it did for him—killed him."

"It wasn't only that."

"Then I don't know what else. Well, I shall have to go up to town early next week."

"Not alone, Prim?"

"I don't know why not—I'm my own mistress entirely now, aren't I? Besides, you don't know any of my friends in town—what would be the use of you coming, and I shall be staying with Pam——"

"How long?"

HUON BELLE

"Oh, I don't know. But it would be better after next week to shut up the house—you see that, don't you?"

Ginny stared at her daughter. Those impossible words had actually been spoken! Their meaning was clear as day; they meant her own daughter was turning her out.

So she was to leave Hill Farm at once.

Pride boiled in her. Pride kept her silent and Pride acted as a narcotic to her deadly hurt (after the first stab of realization of what Prim meant).

She almost unconsciously began slowly to untie the strings of her dreadful old sack of an apron; the apron was associated with her happiest, most-loved hours; hours when she had worked off depression among her flowers, when she had carried Simon's letters, his books in its deep pocket. She let it fall to the ground—and walked away. The act was a renunciation. She turned once half-way to the house and said, over her shoulder, through curling lips:

"You realize, Primula, that the season's work is in full swing? You can't leave the orchard to look after itself—the crop must be picked and shipped away or put into cool-store: contracts must be kept or you're going to lose a lot of money."

"Oh, I daresay I'll get Simon to come and manage for me—until the place is sold."

"Simon has come home to help his grandfather at Sweet Water."

"Simon, my dear mother, has come home to marry me. You know practically, that we are engaged!"

The words were out that had been knocking frantically to be heard at the door of Ginny's heart. Some vital part within her turned to stone. She came back along the path until she stood beside her tall, beautiful daughter.

She held out an impelling hand, but the girl laughed excitedly, pushing it away.

"Prim, you're quite sure?"

HUON BELLE

"I think it's rather stupid of you not to have realized before now. Of course I'm sure."

"You're very young—only just seventeen."

"Well, I think I remember daddy saying that you were only seventeen when I was born. I'm surely as capable of knowing my own mind as you were. More, I should think judging by——"

"Well?" There was something in Ginny's voice that cowed Prim.

"Oh, what's the good of talking! Anyway, when we are married I'm not going to have him settling down in this stuffy Bay—so what's the use of keeping Hill Farm. I do wish he would leave his old grandfather and come over to see me—what's the good of letters? I *must* see him. I haven't seen him since—since the night of my dance."

"You can't expect him to, Prim. The poor old Colonel is heart-broken. Fanny was with him half a life-time. He'll never get anyone to take her place. Never the same place."

"Oh, I don't know—there are plenty of women in the world."

Ginny stared incredulous at the flippant tone. No, no use to expect understanding from Prim—she simply didn't know the meaning of sympathy.

CHAPTER III

TELLS HOW GINNY WAS MADE VIRTUALLY A BEGGAR

PRIM went one week after her father's death to stay with Pam Edwards. A letter came from Mrs. Edwards with Pam's, inviting her. There was no valid reason Ginny could find for keeping her—and Prim had a dozen reasons why she must go—interviews with Mr. Flinton, the bank, everything demanded her presence in town.

The night before she was to go, Simon at last walked along the track from Sweet Water.

It was a night of stars, the moon of Prim's wonderful party was gone; the glamour had gone, and the vivid weeks since his home-coming, looking back, appeared to Simon like tarnished tinsel: the solid fabric, the quiet-coloured tapestry woven on the loom of his daily life had taken back its old attraction for him—his madness for bright colours was past.

But he was bitterly unhappy—he strained this way and that to find a clear way to get out of the mess he had entangled himself in: tinsel threads were broken, they would not, never could, never would for long hold a nature like Simon's—flimsy tinsel—and he asked now for the sombre fabric he had passed over: shame entered his heart, shame and deep regret for those past weeks.

The contents of the Will had effected him more profoundly than even his grandfather guessed. To think that a woman with the goodness and sweet, impressionable sensitiveness

HUON BELLE

(and he knew better than any other that Ginny possessed such sensitiveness) should be subjected to such sordid spite—for that is how Simon read between the lines. At the knowledge his hands itched to injure—the dead. Fiendish thoughts, born of pent-up shame and disillusionment in his own actions of the last weeks, lent ignoble tricks and twists to his mind. But he must wait, hands tied, for the turn of events; must not act as an utter cad.

The path beside the lapping Bay water led him by slender gum trees, white of stem, graceful as silver birches: the distant mountains in the starlight were dim outlines stretched under a deep night sky; something of their tranquility touched him in spite of himself—the everlastingness of them steeped in silence; his Hills of Home. Never, *never*, he took the oath, would he leave the quiet of Belle Bay. Come what might, he would stay. Rumour had reached him of Prim's intention to go, but Ginny must stay. He was even now carrying to her a letter from the colonel—the contents of which would solve their difficulties at Sweet Water as well as her own.

By the time the lights of Hill Farm came in sight his mood had calmed. He found the luggage, strapped trunks, suitcases, boxes, in the hall—Prim's luggage.

She came out of her bedroom flushed and dishevelled with packing, when she heard his voice:

"Hello, Simon—it's taken you a long time—seven days—to come and see me."

"I told you the reason, Prim—I did not realize you were going so soon."

"To-morrow morning—to stay with Pam."

"Not for long?"

"Oh, I can't tell. I'm shutting up the house. You've heard that."

"I heard it, but I didn't believe it. Where is your mother going?"

HUON BELLE

Simon's eyes were so angry she suddenly flamed into anger herself. What right had he, anyway:

"I suppose she's going to Peggy-Rose, or someone . . . I don't know. She's packing in her room."

He stood speechless, furiously angry she could see. She must go carefully for if she could not get Simon's help she would be in a pretty fix.

She made a confiding movement to him.

"Come into the sitting-room. Now don't be cross, Simon dear—I—we've been through such trouble. It's really the best thing to do this, you must see. I mean for the time being—it's impossible here without—daddy." She managed the catch in her voice wonderfully.

"But I—mother and I you know—want to ask if you will take the position—if, Simon, you will manage the orchard—that is for a time."

"I couldn't possibly do it indefinitely, Prim—not possibly."

"Oh no, I don't expect you to—only until it's sold."

"Then it's true that you are selling?"

She nodded and leant her head against him. "What else can I do. How could I look after it all. I'm only seventeen, Simon."

He was touched in spite of himself—she seemed to him such a child to be left with all this responsibility.

"Well—well, if your mother thinks it best, I will, Prim. I want to see your mother. Can I go to her?"

"Not yet. Aren't you going to kiss me, Simon? We're engaged—you haven't forgotten that, Simon? That—that night?"

"No, Prim."

"And when I've got rid of this old orchard we're going to have a marvellous time, travel Simon, and do exactly what we want with all my money. No more work!"

He did not answer, his eyes were staring over her head.

HUON BELLE

Through the uncurtained window the Bay spread out there, in all its peace. Its intimacy, its absorbing charm caught at his heart—*that* would last while this—this pursuit of petty passion, of flesh and blood, where would it leave him? Stranded—mystified. Already the taste of the night of the dance had lost all savour.

“Prim. I told you I didn’t intend to play any more now. Prim, I’m not the kind of man to wile away my time with a rich wife. You’ve got to understand——”

“I’m not going to understand,” she cried.

“You will have to, Prim. Presently you’ll see.”

“Don’t you love me?” He stroked her hair.

“Very much—as a dear, lovely child. I love you dearly—I always have.”

“Then what has happened?”

“I can’t tell you, Prim. I don’t know myself. Only one thing is clear, dead clear—I shall never—leave—the Bay.”

“And I shall never—never live here,” she cried, pulling away from him. “Oh, I think you’re detestable, Simon.”

“Because for the first time in your life, perhaps, you have been made to see that you can’t get everything you ask and want badly? You’ve got to learn, Primmy dear, you’ll find it beastly, but everyone’s got to learn, and discipline isn’t a pretty word or a soft one; now I’m going to your mother. Don’t imagine I want to hurt you to save myself. We’ll have another talk when you’re quieter—when you come back from town.”

“I’m *never* coming back,” she cried passionately and ran into her room, slamming the door. “I hate this place and everyone in it. Loathe them!”

Simon stood for a moment—then his hand went up to his thatch of strange hair with its old gesture when he felt some problem, something, had to be solved. He walked along to Ginny’s door and knocked.

Come in.” The subdued voice barely reached him.

HUON BELLE

He opened and stood with his hair on end—the Simon she remembered of long ago, before Oxford and the world had taken him and tried to coat him with veneer.

She found herself triumphantly thinking: “Veneer’s only a finger-nail thick.” She said aloud: “I thought I heard your voice, Simon.”

“You didn’t come out, Ginny.”

“No, I’ve a tremendous amount to get through before to-morrow.”

He began to speak—there were a thousand things—pitiful things he wanted to say at sight of her white, changed face. Her dark, almost black-blue eyes were haunted—a memory stung him. Where had he seen those eyes. When? But elusive it was gone.

“Poor Ginny, I can’t tell you how sorry——”

She smiled faintly: “All right, Simon dear, I understand. Don’t say it at all.”

He pulled the letter out of his pocket.

“Grandfather sent this. Read it? I know what’s in it. We want your answer now.”

Her eyes ran over the sheets—she looked up with tears.

“He—you’re both the kindest dears. Simon—I’d love to. You know I’ve my living to earn. I’m a beggar: but even if I were not and I had to chose, I’d choose this—housekeeper at Sweet Water. Oh, tell him I thank him—you both—with all my heart.” Her voice broke. She pushed him from her room and shut the door.

In another moment the front door closed. Retreating steps. And behind him the lights in Hill Farm house blazed for the last evening in many months.

CHAPTER IV

TELLS OF THE DESTINY THAT SHAPES OUR ENDS

DEAF BELLA automatically accompanied Ginny to Sweet Water to fill the place of housemaid.

It was a merciful thing she was good friends with cook—for before a month had passed Ginny was taken ill with a low, tiresome fever and for many weeks, though never actually dangerously ill was unable to leave her bed.

The new doctor called it a thorough breakdown of over-taxed nerves.

"But I've never *had* nerves," Ginny asserted weakly, disgusted to find herself condemned to bed.

"Ah, we don't until we do," the doctor told her cryptically. "For very many years you know, Mrs. Gilmore, you've been living at high tensions. Then something caused a—snap."

Ginny, left to watch the autumn mists beginning to curl over the opposite hills (for Sweet Water faced east and she could not ever see her beloved Belle from the house) knew just when the something had snapped. The day before yesterday she had taken up the daily paper and reading through it, had accidentally come upon a notice of "FOR SALE—HILL FARM" in large type.

There followed all details of its acreage and fruit-bearing capacities—its perfect position—the beauty of its surroundings, etc., etc. Though to read it caused pain to run through her and wound like a sword thrust, she still must read every word; and as she read all that had made life sweet and good at the

HUON BELLE

farm seemed to drift before her in procession—for the time old Mrs. Gilmore had taken the poor, pinched faced little girl (herself) to her kindly old heart over the gift of the china dog, to the time Cairns had been proud of her at Prim's birth; the procession, too, of more impersonal things. The sound of church bells across the water, the saintly Gilbert Piers, with his halo of white hair, preaching from his favourite 91st Psalm. "I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him and honour him;" the piercing joy in her heart when the mail had brought her Simon's letters; her music; her flowers in the garden she had made so truly hers by the labour and love she had put into it: and above, beyond all that attic room from whose casement window was the most perfect view of the Huon Belle in all the Huon. All—all these memories lived in Hill Farm—they and it held the precious record of her life. And before her, open to callous eyes was the notice that might cause it any day, any hour, to pass into the hands of strangers. And the pang that struck to the very roots of her being was the thought that Prim had done this. Primula. . . .

The little bundled baby whose soft flower name she had loved to say—who had stopped so bravely through childhood; slipped so easily into critical girlhood—whirled and changed a hundred times while Ginny dreamed her dreams: till suddenly she was waked to consciousness of where she stood in her daughter's estimation by Prim's voice—"That sloppy song—mother's always at it——" After that the procession went limping, the bright pageant came to a dead halt the night of Prim's dance.

Black waters closed over her. . . . There in the parlour at Sweet Water. . . .

Simon found her fallen beside her chair in a dead faint—the newspaper folded at the "FOR SALE," giving sufficient reason.

He cursed himself for a fool that he had not warned someone to keep that page from her: he himself was endlessly

HUON BELLE

busy these days looking after Hill Farm and helping with Sweet Water all he could.

He shouted for Bella, and lifting Ginny in his arms, carried her up to her room. How thin she had grown; as his strong, work-tried arms gathered her up his face softened. His arms had never been around her since he was a boy flinging them about her neck, kissing her good-bye when he rushed in before starting off to boarding-school. She had grown little to him since then, little because he had grown so huge. Little Ginny!

As he lifted her, an unopened letter from Prim dropped from her lap. He motioned Bella to bring it after him to her bedroom.

Together they brought her to from unconsciousness. Dazed and agitated she sat up on the bed.

"Oh, Simon—I didn't faint—again?"

"It wasn't much, Ginny—I suppose something disturbed you. You've not been looking well. Here—read this letter from Prim—there'll be news to interest you, I daresay. No, you're certainly not going to get up. Grandfather's all right, I'll look after him. Now tell me Prim's news." He sat down beside her on the bed, watching her take one sheet carefully from the envelope.

There was a silence while she read—then handing Simon the letter she turned her face to the wall. It was the end of everything so far as she was concerned.

"DEAR MOTHER (it ran),

I am going to give you a shock—I'm married, to Captain Reggie Bancroft, that naval man I told you about, I met when the fleet was in town. We had the jolliest time at dances. Pam was mad about him, too, he came back from

HUON BELLE

Sydney yesterday and we were married at a registry office.
Sorry if you didn't want a sailor son-in-law!

Love from

PRIM.

P.S. Isn't it deadly to think there's been no offer for the Farm."

P.P.S. Reggie thinks Prim silly—I'm to be always Bird Bancroft."

Simon folded the sheet and put it back with a look of distaste into the scented heliotrope envelope. His face showed both disgust and relief. "Thank God," he said devoutly.

But with Ginny the comedy—or tragedy—was not wiped out with two words. She lay tormented with her aching thoughts—wondering what kind of a husband Prim had found: dreading buyers for the farm.

Strangely while through May and June they kept her prisoner in her room—no offers came. In July, Simon carried her downstairs to the old colonel's comfortable library. Their kind unending care of her was ceaseless amazement to Ginny. She never had imagined herself the centre of a picture and here she was waited on, deferred to, warmed with affectionate attentions.

"Letters," Bella said, bringing in the bag, "now, Mitta Gilmore, do you be carefool, my dea'. Bella can't have you ill no more now you're downstairs agen."

Colonel Severing broke the seal of the mailbag and emptied it out as he had done hundreds of times, but among these letters, papers, circulars, Fate had thrust a finger in the pie.

Ginny's pie.

Simon handed her a blue envelope—"Scotch postmark," he said. "Bridge of Allen. Gosh, Ginny, that's queer, I was there once. Do you remember? I wrote to you. I'd almost forgotten. Where's that letter?"

"With all the rest."

HUON BELLE

"But where?"

"Burnt," she said so quietly that the words did not reach the colonel's ears.

"But—Why?"

"Some day I may tell you." Her fingers were trembling as she tried to tear open the envelope.

"Here. Let me." Simon took a paper-knife. "Shall I open it?"

"I'd rather you opened it, Simon. Read it." So Simon it was who first read it. Incredulous amazement spread over his face. He began to read aloud, stopped—went on again—and stopped.

Ginny, with her eyes fixed on the fire, asked no questions. She wanted Simon to read it, to hear what it said from him, but whatever it was it couldn't be anything to break into her present happiness. It was only the past, *of* the past, of course. From that old Laird, her grandfather. She had expected to hear anytime now. The future could not be affected by the past, could it? Only the dear, safe present mattered. She felt herself on a little island of content. Simon was breaking through the waves to her Island. Simon with his intent, serious eyes full of something behind their brightness: and now his vibrant, charming voice that had had power all through her illness to pull her back to save her from depression, broke into the mists of her dream island.

"Congratulations, Virginia Elspeth Cameron Gilmore."

"Don't be silly, Simon—I mean is it truly the Cameron you stayed with? Am I? . . . Is he? I mean quick—I wish you'd tell me!"

"Was he—you must say Ginny the poor old fellow has died, passed over, but not before he had your letter. He remade his Will at once, he was so convinced that you were his daughter's, Elspeth's, child: although the castle and estate goes to another branch of the family, it *must* go in male succession, he has left you a fortune."

HUON BELLE

"Me . . . !" Her eyes besought him. "Not me, Simon, do you mean?"

"You, Virginia."

She suddenly flamed with excitement. "Then I can buy back Hill Farm as it stands!"

"You could, by the look of things in that lawyer's letter, buy back two Hill Farms."

But Ginny was not listening.

"And the Huon Belle."

CHAPTER V

TELLS HOW VIRGINIA CAME AGAIN TO THE WHITE BED

"No use hurrying—no use hurrying," the Dr. said when Ginny would have gone at once to Hill Farm as soon as the papers, transferring the entire property with house, out-buildings, and furnishings from Prim's name to her own, were signed.

"Don't run away from us, yet please," the colonel begged; and Simon with his hands in his pockets, looking down at her lying on the sofa, white and frail, recovering after the long weeks indoors, said curiously:

"Don't *want* to go do you Ginny?"

And Ginny, avoiding his eyes, felt hot colour rush in her cheeks, as she tried to make them understand that she didn't want to go and yet longed to go: couldn't bear the thought of being away even that distance from their dear protection: from the sound of Simon's gay whistle coming in from his work in the orchard, from his cheery voice, from that softening of his eyes when they met hers that she had not yet dared probe for the reason of. Strange and passing strange how the fact of looking *up* to Simon from her bed or sofa had changed the whole of her mental as well as her physical outlook.

He towered over her; she who had always been up and about looking after others, was now the one to be looked after—and by Simon. He was the one who commanded, she it was who obeyed.

He seemed to have grown immeasurably older; and while

HUON BELLE

she, was lying there, she had become—was becoming—every day of her convalescence, she knew, more dependent upon him; unconsciously watching, waiting, aching, for his step. She lashed herself with a false shame at her feelings; was tormented by the thought he might guess that she loved him.

Simon who had loved Prim, perhaps still loved her, even though she was out of reach. Simon who was younger than herself, who in all probability was kind to her purely from pity.

And it was all this that made her long beyond words to go quietly once more to Hill Farm: to bury herself there in the interest of work and the thousand details that would force her attention. Above all to find herself once more within sight of the serene sane tranquility of the Huon Belle.

“For another month stay with us and be looked after,” they urged.

The three men were too much for her, she gave in: and gradually as her bodily strength came back she felt herself getting a fresh grip on everything, even her thoughts became controlled by what she argued was the commonsense view. Peggy-Rose Kant, as always, helped her to steady her reasoning powers after the shocks they had suffered. She began to go much to Green Gates, for poor Tom Kant was growing rapidly worse, and at last his sister was forced to realise the fact that she could look after him no longer. It was a black day when he was taken away to the asylum—but Peggy-Rose had known for years that this must be the inevitable end.

Green Gates soon found a buyer, for it was now flourishing, a small and paying farm and garden, but Peggy-Rose could not face living there alone. It was then, after years of “living within Coo-ee” as the saying goes, that the astounding thing happened. Old Colonel Severing asked Peggy-Rose to marry him.

“And why not?” She demanded when she told Ginny

HUON BELLE

about it and saw the expression that came and went in her dark eyes—"why not? It seems the most sensible thing in the world to me. Here am *I*, alone—there is *he* alone—at least he will be very soon, when you and Si——"—she pulled herself up suddenly. "When you go back to Hill Farm as you insist. We are both grey-haired, I grant you, but I am only a vigorous fifty and can look well after the old dear. And if we're married he can rest easy in his mind that I shall never want to go off as I might if I were a paid house-keeper. No, Ginny, from every point of view. Do you remember that day he came to tell us that his son Simon was coming with his wife and boy to live with us?"

Ginny remembered.

"Poor Tom called you Prim the Belle of the Huon. Well, she was, for a nihgt! Strange the echo of past sounds that comes back through the years—I can still hear your baby's tinkling laugh."

"Thin—empty," Ginny said half to herself. Then rousing, she said to Peggy Rose:

"Colonel Severing always loved *your* laugh, my dear. Well, I think it's going to be the very best thing that ever happened. And you've nothing to wait for."

"Nothing," Peggy-Rose said half sadly. "I've not a tie on earth. So we shall be married in September and make a sport of old age. Romance may have died with youth, but affection and pleasant companionship are a very good substitute."

So Ginny insisted on going over to Hill Farm on the first day of September to see that all was straight before she moved back with Bella for good on the day of the wedding.

Simon had gone over early as he always did, in his capacity of overseer, but to-day he carried the keys of the house.

He went through opening windows to let the sweet, sharp spring air come floating into the long-closed rooms. He lighted fires, to take away the damp of winter's past fogs, and going into the garden he found early Fresias and long brachnes

HUON BELLE

of flowering peach to put in Ginny's sitting-room. Then he went away to the orchards and left Ginny to make her way in alone.

He knew she would rather, knew by instinct there were many ghosts she must rouse—and must bury alone. He could not help her with the past.

But in the future?

An hour after he had seen her walk across the verandah into the house he came up from the sheds whistling. The familiar soft notes warned Ginny where she sat on a chair at the open window of the attic. . . .

“But come ye back when Summer's in the meadow
Or when the valley's hushed and white with snow
It's I'll be here in sunshine or in shadow. . . .”

The Huon Belle out there lay steeped in hot sunshine; smiling, peaceful, utterly and beautifully serene away above the waters of the Bay.

Nothing could penetrate that calm, nothing. Though the lives of men beat themselves out in tragedies at her feet. Though storms break; though happiness rise and swell to bursting in human hearts. . . .

“Ginny—Virginia!” The voice of Simon calling on the stairs, his leaping steps.

“What you doing right up here? Oh, I see—your beloved Belle. By Jove, you see it at its best up here!”

“Her, Simon—her best.”

“Yes, I mustn't forget she *lives* for you!”

“As beauty always lives and breathes, Simon. Life is the love of the common things: love of the rivers and mountains: love of the soil, it's rough, hard feel, the knowledge that we've to beat it, conquer it, or it conquers us. It's greed eats our lives, Simon. And look, Simon, where they're clearing down there—that blue smoke from the green wattle boughs they are burning—that's what they tell us, we go up in

HUON BELLE

smoke. But if you lift your eyes to that," she pointed to the Belle—"could you believe it?"

Instead of answering her he said: "Why did you burn those letters, Ginny?"

She did not speak—could not; instead sat staring through the window clinging to her self-control.

But he insisted: "Ginny, tell me"; and he leaned towards her. "*What made you burn* those letters, Virginia? Was Prim the trouble—Cairns? No one ever saw them?"

"No."

She did not answer more than that, but sat with hands holding one another in her lap in her odd nervous attitude. Simon came suddenly from the window where he had stood watching her with his back to the light: he knelt beside her, she could see his face now, his intent eyes, the determined seriousness, the *love* stamped there; this man's air of mastery brought the blood rushing to her neck and cheeks. . . . Everything was swept away, all silly conventions, all the arguments about age she had put up in a heart longing simply to cry Simon, Simon. . . . Still she could not find words.

"Dearest Ginny, tell me why you burnt them!"

Changing suddenly to passion he cried: "you don't know how it hurt me—I had sent you the best part of myself in those letters. I kept every one of your's—they are in my locked drawer at Sweet Water, labelled 'The Virginia letters.' I can't tell you what they mean—meant to me. Then, when you told me mine were burnt I took it that you had thought so little of them——"

"No. No, it wasn't that, Simon! It was because I thought too much. My dear—I—I—adored them, I loved every separate one—for years they kept me from the bitterness that is worse than death. Can't you understand now? Must I put it into words——"

Unintentionally she found herself begging as though he wouldn't help her out of her tangle. He said slowly: "I

HUON BELLE

think I'm beginning to see. But tell me—I want to have it from you to believe it. Tell me, beloved.”

She turned her clear steadfast eyes to him, answering quickly, “I hid them, those letters, as it seemed that I always had to hide the best things in my life. And isn't it strange that hidden things send roots deeper than seen things. . . . Then you came back; and from the first moment—in that thunder-storm—I could see that you loved Prim—she's so lovely, so attractive—so, so——”

“So like a shallow in the Bay,” he finished impatiently, “ready to reflect in her pretty little self all the things that lie in untroubled waters. Like reflections she simply can't face storms and contrary winds. I have been a weak fool, I flirted with her I grant you for fun, but Ginny that wasn't love—it was an obsession. I never was so thankful in my life as I was when she wrote she was married.”

“How was I to know? How could I see your true heart beneath that insincerity, Simon?”

He took her by the shoulders and looked into her dark eyes; he was struck anew by the beautiful sincerity of her expression, the tranquil mouth set in firm sweetness now gave him a feeling of security.

At last Simon felt the solid foundation of his world firm under his feet, here in the full sight of the mountains.

“Dear Huon Belle! Dear Ginny,” he whispered, “was it because you loved me you burnt them? was it because you wanted to persuade yourself you could destroy love as you destroyed the letters? Was it? Was it, Virginia?”

“Yes, Simon.”

Never were eyes so clear, so deep a blue as Ginny's when she owned her love. She rose and reaching her hands up to his shoulders pulled his head down so that she might put her lips to his forehead.

But he caught her up in his arms, so much taller, so much stronger than Virginia now was he, and carried her across to the old white bed.

HUON BELLE

And there they sat together, locked in each others arms for enchanted hours above the world of everyday.

"I've loved you for years, Ginny," the man Simon told her with his lips against hers. "I love your dear eyes and your pale hair and the beautiful serenity that is *you*. You're so gentle, my dear one. . . . I shall keep you safe for ever and ever. Marry me soon, Ginny—marry me on the day Peggy-Rose marries grandfather. Why not?"

She laughed softly and said: "Why not! Very well, Simon."

"And we will take this for our room, Ginny darling . . . so that we shall sleep with the Belle on guard outside the window, and wake to find her guarding still. You'd like that?" He rubbed his cheek endearingly up and down against hers.

"I'd love that," she whispered. "Oh, Simon, Hill Farm, all this"—she freed her hand and pointed—"is ours, ours, ours."

"I know, beloved. Life is good when we get out of the *jumble*, up into the clear air, isn't it?"

And away at the head of Belle Bay the Huon Belle lay with profile cut clean against the immaculate blue of the sky.

Smiling her credulous smile she lay and gazed, yet ever untouched, untroubled by the mortals fighting their way up, some losing it, some finding it as Simon and Virginia found it up in the high clear air.

THE END

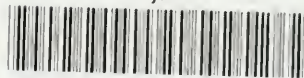
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LIBRARY

Los Angeles

This book is DUE on the last date stamped below.

PR9619.3 .D55h

yr



L 009 515 404 3

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



A A 001 417 885 9

